CONSIDERING CONTEXT

The old and new covenants, Paul’s “two covenants” (Gal. 4:24), are the watermark of his letter to the Galatians. Its message is interpreted based on how one defines the old and new covenants. Among his numerous historical references in Galatians, note several observations that suggest he is not pitting the Sinai covenant against the historical new covenant:

• Paul affirms that there is only one gospel, not one for the Old Testament era and another for the New Testament era (Gal. 1:6–9).

• The one true gospel was anchored in Jewish heritage because Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness,” and through his “‘. . . Seed,’ who is Christ,” “all the nations shall be blessed” (3:6, 16, 8, NKJV).

• When, 430 years later, God gave Israel “the Law,” the beautiful historical-old-covenant revelation of the gospel, it did “not invalidate a covenant [with Abraham] previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise” (Gal. 3:17, NASB); some Jewish teachers were wrongly teaching in the Galatian church that it did, thus creating an alternate gospel. The Sinai covenant affirmed the gospel previously given, adding that God is gracious, forgiving, compassionate, and loving, and that He sought their love and faithfulness to Him in response (Exod. 34:6, 7; Deut. 6:4–9; Ps. 103; and so forth).

These theological anchors in Galatians establish the context for our close examination of this lesson’s inScribe passage (Gal. 3:21–25).
Write out Galatians 3:10–29 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Galatians 3:21–25. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/ phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you

Draw Arrows to connect words/ phrases to other associated or related words/phrases

What special insights do your marks seem overall to point to?

Memorize your favorite verse in Galatians 3:10–29. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

After seeing that the old and new covenants are the same, but differing in response and experience, how does that impact the rest of your understanding of the Bible and salvation, in relation to Jesus?

THIS IS TRUE UNTIL . . .

Galatians 3:21–25 is often used to “prove” that since Jesus came in history, the Sinai covenant has no further application for New Testament/new covenant believers. Paul contrasts the two covenants in this passage in a unique manner, that one is applicable until the other becomes possible and available.

Most interpreters teach that the left-column characterizations apply to the Sinai covenant and the right column to the historical new covenant. Thus, after Jesus came in history and “instituted” the new covenant, believers are no longer “under” the Sinai covenant that is characterized in Galatians 3:22–25 as a “tutor” (NKJV) or “guardian” (NIV). Furthermore, if believers were “under the” Sinai law system, they would have been “confined . . . under sin” (NKJV), “locked up under the control of sin” (NIV), “kept under guard” (NKJV), “kept in custody . . . shut up” (NASB), “held captive . . . imprisoned” (ESV), “kept as prisoners” (NET Bible), “locked up” (NIV), and so forth, until the new covenant became available.

Now note the new covenant (right column) characteristics that do not occur even once in the old covenant (left column) list: “promise” (mentioned once, v. 22), “justified” (once, v. 24), “Jesus Christ”/“Christ” (twice, vv. 22, 24), and “faith” (five times, vv. 22, 23, 24, 25)!

If the left column represents the historical old (Sinai) covenant and the right column represents the historical new covenant after Jesus came in history, then “promise,” “justified,” “faith,” and “Jesus Christ” were absent from the Sinai covenant and were not available or possible until Jesus came in history. If, however, the left column represents an old covenant experience and the right column a new covenant experience, then everyone since Adam’s fall has been “confined under sin,” kept in custody/under guard/held captive/locked up/shut up . . . “under the law” which served as a “tutor” until they might accept the gospel appeal and be converted/justified through faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of the historical era they lived in.

Note the following additional observations:

• The Sinai covenant did not “annul . . . the promise” of the Messianic “Seed” to come through Abraham’s lineage; it protected it (Gal. 3:16–18). Additionally, the four new covenant promises were first explicitly given in the Sinai covenant (see lesson 3). So “the promise” came before Jesus came in history.

• The Old Testament believer who trusted in and served Yahweh was trusting in and serving the preincarnate Jesus Christ (Heb. 11:24–26).

• Paul’s statement, “The law is not of faith [Greek, pistis]” (Gal. 3:12) was not meant to nullify Jesus’ statement that “faith” (Greek, pistis) was one of “the weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23).

• Old Testament believers were justified by their faith in Yahweh/ Jesus (Hebrews 11), not by the law, because the law by itself could not give life (Gal 3:21). The Old Testament believer’s faith in Yahweh was faith in the one and only true gospel (Gal. 1:6–9) as revealed in the Old Testament covenants from Adam (Gen. 3:15) to Sinai (Heb. 3:14–4:2); it was in every way vibrant faith, robust faith, faith in Yahweh/Jesus, and thus saving faith, justifying faith—even before Jesus came in history!

While these observations do not answer all the questions raised in Galatians, how should these biblical facts influence how we interpret the old and new covenants that Galatians 3:21–25 alludes to?
THE “THREE USES” AND COMMANDMENTS OR PROMISES?

Assuming that Galatians 3:21–25 is contrasting experiential old and new covenants rather than historical ones, what does Paul mean that “the law was our tutor” but “after faith has come” (i.e., conversion) “that we might be justified by faith,” “we are no longer under a tutor” (NKJV)? Three possibilities are compatible with an experiential interpretation (the third is discussed in inVite).

First, the Protestant reformers adopted a view of the Ten Commandments that theologians refer to as the “three uses” of the law. The first use is its civil role: it restrains crime in society as a whole by threatening punishment for disobedience. The second role is tutorial: the Holy Spirit uses the law to convict of sin and it leads to saving faith in Christ. Its third role, applied especially to believers, is didactic or normative: the moral law, especially the Ten Commandments, provides a description of godly behavior.

One could easily understand Galatians 3:23 as the law’s first use, its civil use, people being in the law’s custody before they came to faith. In this role “the law” serves society as a whole as a restraint on crime, abuse, discrimination, and so forth. Protestant Reformer John Calvin interpreted 3:24 as the law’s second use, its tutorial role, being used by the Holy Spirit to bring sinners to repentance and to Christ. His commentary on 3:25 defended the law’s third use as “a rule of life . . . profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” . . . as much in force as ever and remains untouched” (John Calvin, Institutes [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949], 388; and Calvin’s Commentaries: Romans-Galatians [Grand Rapids MI: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.], 1898.

Second, beyond the law’s function of restraining evil (“thou shalt not . . .”) it serves a promissory role in the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctifying believers. Many Old Testament scholars do not use the term Ten Commandments when referring to the Decalogue (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). Rather, they refer to the Decalogue as the “Ten Words.” They do this not to be pedantic but because it is more accurate. The Hebrew and Old Testament Greek terms for the Decalogue (Heb. ‘aseret hadebarim; Gk. tous deka logous) mean “ten words” and can be used as imperatives in some contexts and as promissory in others (Wilhelm Gesenius, Hebrew Grammar, ed. Emil F. Kautzsch [Oxford: Clarendon, 1910], par. 113bb, 113ee.). It is entirely possible that the Ten Commandments were always intended to be received also as ten moral promises from God. Not merely as “Do not . . .” but also as “You will not . . .,” meaning, “I promise that I will write these laws on your heart so that you will always live this way.” Thus Ellen G. White’s comment: “All His biddings are enablings” (Christ’s Object Lessons, 333).

Viewed in this light, Galatians 3:21–25 could reasonably and easily be understood to mean that in His grace God gave sinful humanity His multidimensional and multi-purpose law (1) as a deterrent against civil disobedience within society as a whole (vv. 22, 23); (2) as a convicting influence in the life of unbelievers, pointing them toward Christ and conversion (v. 24); and (3) as divine promises for what the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying ministry will produce as He writes His law on believers’ hearts (v. 25). At conversion, one, in essence, graduates from the second use of the law (bringing us to Christ) to its third use (the Holy Spirit writing it on our hearts), with baptism as the graduation ceremony. Though as Romans 7:14–25 in specific, the whole of Scripture in general, and our own spiritual experiences all testify, both the second and third uses of the law will necessarily be operative in the lives of believers until Jesus comes.
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

1 John 5:14, 15
Galatians 2:15–20
Hebrews 3:14–4:2; 11:1–40
Psalm 37:3–6
Psalm 115:9–11
Matthew 23:23

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Galatians 3:10–29?

Review your memorized verse from Galatians 3:10–29.
FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END

Did “the law” always exist? Will “the law” always exist into the future? Did “the law” exist before Jesus wrote it out on tablets of stone at Sinai?

Jesus said, “The devil . . . was a murderer from the beginning. . . . He is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44, NKJV). How could Satan have been a murderer and a liar if there had not been a law against murdering or stealing before earth’s history?

Paul described the law as “holy and just and good . . . [and] spiritual” (Rom. 7:12, 14, NKJV). Wait a minute, that’s what God is—holy, just, good, and spiritual (Isa. 6:3; 1 John 1:9; Ps. 34:8; 1 Cor. 10:4)!

Thus the saying, “The law is a transcript of God’s character,” prescribing how humans created in God’s image and likeness were designed to live, morally and spiritually patterned after how God Himself lives. At creation Adam and Eve must have lived naturally and happily with a moral and spiritual nature like God’s nature, without needing the Ten Commandments/Ten Words spelled out for them in the form Jesus wrote them out at Sinai.

Ellen White writes: “When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of” (Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, 109). Evidently a moral law operated in heaven, but when love reigned supreme, heaven’s occupants were unaware of its existence because the law of God written in their hearts merely describes the way true love expresses itself naturally.

In this war zone between Eden lost and Eden restored, it became necessary for God’s law to be explicitly expressed in the form of commandments. The Sinai covenant laws numbered 613 commandments (including the national civil code and a manual of sorts for priests). The New Testament gives more than nine hundred direct and three hundred indirect commands. No Old Testament or New Testament author, nor Jesus Himself, “trusted ‘love’ as a safe single command, or trusted the Holy Spirit’s internal guidance as a safe replacement for all law and very specific divine commandments” (Skip MacCarty, In Granite or Ingrained [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007], 153; cf. 152–155, 300–303). But another Day is coming!

Could it be that, in addition to the insights shared in inTerpret, Galatians 3:25 reflects Jesus’ longing for that glorious Day of return to original conditions, when He has fully written His law in the heart of everyone who has responded to His gospel appeal by faith and has relied on Him for an obedient heart (Heb. 8:10), that Day when all from the least to the greatest will know Him and evangelistic missions per se will be a thing of the past (8:11)? In that Day we will live as we were created to live in Eden, with the image of Jesus restored in us, living out of hearts made perfect in love. Perhaps in that Day, written commandments will once again not even be necessary.

Even now we can claim His promise that “if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses” (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, 668).
**THE LIFE AND THE LAW**

“God’s law is a copy of His mind and will. The sins forbidden there could never find a place in Heaven. It was love that prompted God to express His will in the ten precepts of the decalogue. Afterward He showed His love for man by sending prophets and teachers to explain and illustrate His holy law.” (Ellen G. White, *The Bible Echo*, April 16, 1894, par. 12.)

“The law of God existed before man was created. It was adapted to the condition of holy beings; even angels were governed by it. After the fall, the principles of righteousness were unchanged. Nothing was taken from the law; not one of its holy precepts could be improved. And as it has existed from the beginning, so will it continue to exist throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. ‘Concerning thy testimonies,’ says the psalmist, ‘I have known of old that thou hast founded them forever.’” (White, *Selected Messages*, 1:220.)

“Holding up Christ as our only source of strength, presenting His matchless love in having the guilt of the sins of men charged to His account and His own righteousness imputed to man, in no case does away with the law or detracts from its dignity. Rather, it places it where the correct light shines upon and glorifies it. This is done only through the light reflected from the cross of Calvary. The law is complete and full in the great plan of salvation, only as it is presented in the light shining from the crucified and risen Saviour. This can be only spiritually discerned. It kindles in the heart of the beholder ardent faith, hope, and joy that Christ is his righteousness. This joy is only for those who love and keep the words of Jesus, which are the words of God.” (White, *Lift Him Up*, 150.)

“Every soul may say: ‘By His perfect obedience He has satisfied the claims of the law, and my only hope is found in looking to Him as my substitute and surety, who obeyed the law perfectly for me. By faith in His merits I am free from the condemnation of the law. He clothes me with His righteousness, which answers all the demands of the law. I am complete in Him who brings in everlasting righteousness. He presents me to God in the spotless garment of which no thread was woven by any human agent. All is of Christ, and all the glory, honor, and majesty are to be given to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world.’” (White, *Selected Messages*, 1:396.)

“God will help us if we take hold of the help He has provided. ‘Let him take hold of My strength,’ He says, ‘that he may make peace with Me, and he shall make peace with Me’ [Isaiah 27:5]. This is a blessed promise. Many times, when I have been discouraged and almost in despair, I have come to the Lord with this promise, and said, ‘Let me take hold of Thy strength, that I may make peace with Thee; and I shall make peace with Thee.’ And as I have laid hold of the strength of God, I have found a peace which passeth understanding.” (White, *Sermons and Talks*, 2:7.4.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is the repeated theme of Lessons 6 to 10?

How is the Law a deterrent against civil disobedience?

How does the Law influence unbelievers toward Christ and a spiritual conversion?

How is the Law a divine promise?

How has your Sabbath-keeping (or any other commandment) ever been under threat by misinterpretations of the covenants?

What has been your experience with the tutor thus far?

How does “obeying Him . . . shall be but carrying out our own impulses” make you feel?