

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-SIX)

“THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW”

(PART 2)

GALATIANS 3:19-22

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

20 Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

21 Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Last week we stated that in verse 19, Paul answers the argument that if the Law was never given as a means of salvation, then that fact leaves it without any apparent reason for existence. He writes, *“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.”*

Paul’s argument is that the Law was given at a specific time to a specific people. It was delivered by Moses to Israel as he received it from God

on Mount Sinai. The Law was not added to grace as an extra provision whereby a sinner might appropriate salvation, for it is diametrically opposed to grace. It “*came in*” alongside of grace as a measure to show sinners the real nature of their sin and thus their need of a Saviour who in infinite grace offers them a free salvation in answer to faith.

The Law was added “*because of transgressions.*” Paul is explaining that the Law was introduced in order that sin might take on the character of actual transgression. Unless there is a revealed law, sin is sinful but it is not regarded as transgression. When the Law was given, sin was seen to be, not merely the following of evil impulses, but as the violation of explicit law. Thus, the exceeding sinfulness of sin was recognized by the human race, which otherwise might not have been evident. It was the Law which turned sin into transgression.

The Covenant of Law was brought in alongside the Abrahamic Covenant, “*until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.*” Paul is saying here that the Law is inferior to the Abrahamic Covenant of promise because the Law was temporary. Obviously, a temporary law cannot be greater than a permanent covenant. With the death and resurrection of Christ, the “*offspring*” or “*seed,*” the Law was done away with and now its righteous demands are fulfilled in us through the Holy Spirit according to **Romans 8:1-4**.

But not only is the Law inferior to the Abrahamic Covenant because of its temporary nature, it is also inferior to that covenant because it required a mediator. Paul writes that the Law, “*was put in place through angels by an intermediary.*” When God gave the Law to Israel, He did it by means of angels and through the mediation of Moses. Thus the children of Israel received the Law **third hand**, from God to angels to Moses. But when God made His covenant with Abraham He did it **personally**, without any mediator.

The Law was temporary, and required a mediator. The Covenant of Promise was permanent, and no mediator was required. Clearly then, the Abrahamic Covenant was greater than the Law.

In verse **20**, Paul writes, “*Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.*” In this verse Paul emphasizes the point he had made in verse **19** that the Abrahamic Covenant of promise is superior to the Law, because it was given directly from God to Abraham, whereas the Law was given to Israel by God through a mediator. Paul’s point seems to be that an “*intermediary,*” or a mediator is required when more than one party is involved, but it was God alone Who ratified the covenant with Abraham. A mediator implies a covenant between two parties, both of whom have responsibilities. This is certainly true of the Covenant of Law. It was **bilateral** and **conditional**. But the Abrahamic Covenant of promise was **unilateral** and **unconditional**, and was given to Abraham directly by God without a mediator, because God alone was responsible for fulfilling it!

John MacArthur comments on the verse as follows:

“The Greek text of **Galatians 3:20** is difficult to translate and interpret, but Paul seems to be pointing out that a mediator...is needed only when more than one party is involved. God gave the covenant directly to Abraham without a mediator because He was the only One involved in making the covenant. Abraham was a **witness** to the covenant and was a **beneficiary**, but he was not a **party** to it. Abraham had no part in establishing or keeping the covenant. That responsibility was God’s alone. The covenant of law, however, not only involved mediators (angels and Moses) but mutual obligations on the two parties (God and Israel). The stipulation of that covenant was, ‘*You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live*’ (**Deuteronomy 5:33**). Man’s part was to obey and God’s was to give life, to save. The problem was that man could not keep His part, and therefore God could not grant salvation.”

Kenneth Wuest explains that a mediator stands in the midst of two or more persons and acts as a go-between. He or she acts on the behalf of a plurality of **parties**. The Law was a contract between two **parties**. God gave the Law through a mediator Moses, and persons were obligated to

obey it. God promised to bless them if they obeyed the terms and conditions stipulated in the covenant, and to punish them if they disobeyed. But the Abrahamic Covenant of promise was not in the nature of a contract between two parties. God acted alone and directly when He promised salvation to anyone who would receive it by faith. There are no good works that need to be done by the sinner in order that he or she might merit that salvation. Grace is unconditional. There are no strings tied to it. God is One, that is, He acts alone without a mediator in respect to the promise of grace. Therefore grace is superior to Law.

William Hendriksen, in his commentary on **Galatians**, writes:

“Though a human intermediary may be ever so important, he is, after all, only a third party acting between two other parties. Moses served as a **human** link between God and the people. Such an intermediary lacks independent authority. God, however, is One. When he made his promise to Abraham—and through him to all believers, whether Jew or Gentile...he did this on his own sovereign account, directly, personally. He was speaking from the heart to the heart.”

Now does this mean that there is antagonism between God’s Law and God’s Promises? You can almost hear the legalistic Judaizers asking this question. No doubt Paul, in his mind’s ear, could hear them asking this question, and so he asks and answers it for them in verse **21**. He writes, *“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.”*

In this verse Paul argues that the Law, rather than **contradicting** the promises of God, actually **cooperates** with them in fulfilling the purposes of God! The question is, *“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?”* Paul’s answer is definitive, *“Certainly not!”* Such a thought is inconceivable. Who was it that gave the Law? It was God. Who was it that gave the promises? It was the same God. So logically the Law and the Promise cannot be opposed to each other for they both

were given by the same God! If they were indeed opposed to each other, then God would be working against Himself!

Paul invokes the strongest term in the Greek to reject the view that the Law was contrary to the promises of God. By so doing he is stating in the strongest possible manner that God's Law is not an enemy to God's Promises, but friend! What we must understand and appreciate is that God gave both the Law and Promises, but He gave them for different purposes. As **W.E. Vine** comments,

"It is inconceivable that these two things...could be in themselves inconsistent one with the other. They represent different elements in the character of God. One, the law, is the expression of His righteousness; the other, the promise, is the expression of His grace. Now God is not at war with Himself."

The reason that the Law is not opposed to the promise is that, although in itself the Law cannot save, it serves to reveal sin, it reveals sin as being, not merely **hamartia** (a failing to hit the mark), but **parabasis** (a willful violation of God's righteous decrees), which alienates sinful human beings from a thrice holy God. As we noted in our previous Lesson, the Law did not take the place of the grace of God, nor was it given to be mixed with grace. The Law was added to, or placed alongside grace. In other words, it was God's grace, through the ministration of the Law, to show the sinner how exceedingly sinful sin is, to reveal to the sinner his or her true character, and his or her great need of the grace of God.

Wuest gives an intriguing illustration of Paul's argument. He says,

"Law and grace are not in conflict, since they operate in different spheres. For instance, here is a father who has discovered that his son has disobeyed his commands. He calls the son's attention to the law which he broke, and pronounces him guilty. He uses this very sentence of guilty to bring the boy to see his misdemeanor in its true light. The

son becomes repentant, and the father assures him of his forgiveness. The father is not in conflict with himself when using law to bring his son to a realization of the true nature of his disobedience, in order that he might repent and thus put himself in a position where the father can forgive him. God is not in conflict with Himself when He gives the law that man might come to see his sin as a transgression or violation of His holy will, which is the first step in his act of repentance and faith, and which latter is answered by God with the gift of eternal life."

C.H. Spurgeon remarks that,

"The law is not the opponent of the promise, but an agent for putting men where they feel themselves to be in need of mercy and therefore accept salvation by grace."

The problem with the Law is found in its inability to give strength to those who desire to keep it. Paul emphasizes this when he says, "*For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.*" Paul's point is that the Law could not impart spiritual life, nor could it make a sinner righteous in God's sight. In other words the Law could not justify or save a person, nor could it give them right standing before God. If that had been possible the Law would indeed have been in opposition to the promises of God, for then there would be two conflicting ways for a sinner to be saved, one way by keeping the Law (works), and the other by believing the promises of God (faith). Earlier, in chapter 2 and verse 21, Paul had written, "*I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.*"

Wuest comments that,

"The wages of sin is death. The law demands of the sinner the death penalty, spiritual and physical death. The law will not accept the good works of a sinner in lieu of the death penalty. Only the precious blood

of Jesus could satisfy the righteous demands of the broken law. Salvation therefore is by grace, since God the Son took the sinner's place on the Cross and offers salvation to the one who believes on Him."

The Grace of God, through the Spirit of God accomplished what the Law could not accomplish. In **Romans 8:3-4**, Paul writes,

3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Paul puts his finger on the inherent weakness of the Law, as both a system and a standard; in no way could the Law give eternal life because no amount of **doing** can generate spiritual life in a dead human soul. In **Romans 3:19-22**, Paul clearly establishes that righteousness is never based on Law but always obtained on faith. The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows:

19 Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God.

20 For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.

21 But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago.

22 We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

Listen to what Paul says to the believers in Colossae in **Colossians 2:20-23**:

20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,

21 “Don’t handle! Don’t taste! Don’t touch!”?

22 Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.

23 These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person’s evil desires.

(New Living Translation)

The harmony between the Law and the promises can be demonstrated by recognizing that while the Law could not justify or give life because it was not its purpose to do so, it did prepare the way for the Gospel. The Law declared the whole world a prisoner of sin. Paul informs us of this in **Galatians 3:22**. He writes, “*But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*”

The word “*But*” at the beginning of the verse is a term of contrast. Paul is contrasting what he had written at the end of verse **21**, with what he writes in verse **22**. At the end of verse **21**, Paul had written, “*For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.*” In verse **22**, he informs us that what actually happened was the very opposite of the supposition at the end of verse **21**. The Law did not open the door to righteousness, but shut the door in effect, imprisoning human beings and the rest of creation under sin.

The word “*imprisoned*” is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “to shut up or enclose together on all sides.” The idea is

to shut up securely, enclosing on all sides with no way of escape, as with fish in a net. It is clear then, that there is no escape from the kind of imprisonment that the Law sentences a sinner to except that which grace provides through faith in Jesus Christ.

In this verse, Scripture is personified as a fisherman catching fish in a net or a jailor shutting persons in a prison cell under a death sentence. Paul says “*everything*” was imprisoned by the Law. The word “*everything*” is a translation of the Greek word **pas** which means, “any, every, of every kind, all manner of, the whole.” The idea is “all without exception.” In **Romans 3:9** and **19**, Paul conveys the same truth:

Verse 9

*“What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that **all**, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”*

Verse 19

*“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that **every mouth** may be stopped, and **the whole world** may be held accountable to God.”*

Commenting on this verse, **Wuest** writes the following:

“The word scripture in the singular number refers to a particular passage. Two Old Testament passages to which Paul probably has reference, are, **Psalm 143:2**, quoted in **Galatians 2:16**, and **Deuteronomy 27:26**, quoted in **3:10**...Scripture in its divine utterances regarding the universality of sin, is spoken of as a jailer who shuts all up in sin as in a prison. The function of the law was therefore to convict of sin that men might turn to the Lord Jesus for salvation.”

Although Paul switches from the Law to the Scripture the sense is not changed. The Law in this verse is synonymous with the Scripture. Paul is arguing that the Law, contained in Scripture was given to create

within human beings a consciousness that they were completely enveloped in sin with no ability to rescue themselves from their awful spiritual dilemma.

Brothers and sisters, it is very important for us to understand and appreciate that outside of Jesus Christ we are under the power of sin for it is only those who are conscious of guilt who will seek justification. As **MacArthur** explains,

"Not until a person smashes himself against the demands of the law and the accusations of conscience does he recognize his helplessness and see his need for a Savior. Not until the law has arrested and imprisoned him and sentenced him to death will he be driven to despair in himself and turn to Jesus Christ. The ultimate purpose of shutting up men under sin and death was that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. The law was given to bring men under sin to the point of saying, '*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*' (**Romans 7:24**). Grace is given to enable those who believe to say, '*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*' (**Romans 7:25**).

James Montgomery Boice insightfully points out that,

"In the first part of this verse Paul gives a capsule statement of the major truths of the first three chapters of Romans: the law shows that all—the immoral person, the ethical person, and the religious person—have sinned and need a Savior. The second half of the verse reminds us that there is indeed a Savior and that it had always been God's purpose to save a great company through faith in him. **Seen from this angle, even the law flowed from God's grace, because it prepared men and women to receive the Lord Jesus Christ when he came.**"

The purpose of the Law imprisoning every human being under the power of sin is so that they might hear and believe the Gospel. So we see

that the Law is not opposed to the Promises of God, because the Law works like God's "sheep dog" to herd us toward the promises. When persons recognize that this is the purpose of the Law and give up their attempts to please God by their own works, the way is prepared for them to receive the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So while the Law and the promise may appear to be at odds, they are actually partners in providing a solution to the human problem!

