

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-SEVEN)

“THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW”

(PART 3)

GALATIANS 3:23-24

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

23 Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

In this section of his letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul continues his explanation, which he had begun in verse **19**, as to the purpose of God in giving the Law. In verse **19**, He made the point that the Law was given at a specific time to a specific people. The Law was not added to grace as an extra provision whereby a sinner might appropriate salvation. 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.

In verse **20**, he states that the Law was temporary, and required a mediator, while The Abrahamic Covenant of Promise was permanent, and no mediator was required. Clearly then, the Abrahamic Covenant was greater than the Law.

In verse **21**, he points out that there is no antagonism between God’s Law and God’s Promises. Rather than **contradicting** the promises of God, the Law actually **cooperates** with them in fulfilling the purposes of

God! 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.

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 verse 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."*

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. The "Scripture" in this verse is synonymous with the Law. 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. The purpose of the Law imprisoning every human being under the power of sin is so that they might hear and believe the Gospel.

Warren Wiresbe makes the following helpful remarks:

"The Law was given to reveal sin...It is here that we see the way that Law and grace cooperate in bringing the lost sinner to Jesus Christ. Law shows the sinner his guilt, and grace shows him the forgiveness he can have in Christ. The Law is *'holy, and just, and good'* (**Romans 7:12**), but we are unholy, unjust, and bad. The Law does not make us sinners; it reveals to us that we already are sinners...The Law is a mirror that helps us see our *'dirty faces'*...but you do not wash your face with the mirror! It is grace that provides the cleansing through the blood of Jesus

There is a **lawful** use of the Law, and there is an **unlawful** use...The lawful use is to reveal sin and cause men to see their need of a Saviour.

The unlawful use is to try to achieve salvation by the keeping of the Law. When people claim they are saved by 'keeping the Ten Commandments,' they are revealing their ignorance of the true meaning of the Law. The Law concludes 'all under sin' (**Galatians 3:22**), Jews and Gentiles alike. But since all are under sin, then all may be saved by grace! God does not have two ways of salvation; He has but one-faith in Jesus Christ."

In verse **23**, Paul continues his personification of the Law as a jailor shutting persons in a prison cell under a death sentence. He writes, "*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.*"

Kenneth Wuest explains that the correct understanding of the phrase, "*Before faith came*" is found in the fact that in the Greek, the definite article is used before the word faith. Paul says, "Before **the** faith came." The definite article identifies the faith that is mentioned in this verse with the faith spoken of in verse **22**, in the expression, "*the promise by **faith** in Jesus Christ.*" Paul is speaking of the personal faith that a believing sinner exercises in Jesus Christ as his or her Saviour, now that the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ are accomplished facts. In character, that faith is fundamentally the same as the faith exercised by Abraham and all the other Old Testament believers, but it is different in that it looks **back** to an accomplished salvation at the Cross, whereas the faith of Abraham and the other Old Testament believers looked **forward** to the accomplishment of that salvation at Calvary. The faith of New Testament believers is faith in a **historic** Christ (One Who has already come), whereas the faith of Old Testament believers was faith in a prophetic Christ (One Who had not yet come).

It is important for us to understand that Paul is not saying here that Faith did not begin to be exercised until after the occasion of the Cross. Faith as did not come to be the appointed means of salvation only after Calvary. Faith has been the appointed means of obtaining the salvation

of God since Adam's time. But the **particular** faith in Jesus Christ as exercised in the Age of the New Covenant, came into being after His death and resurrection.

Before the particular faith in Jesus Christ as exercised in the Age of the New Covenant, came into being after His death and resurrection, lost human beings were, "*held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.*" The words, "*held captive*" are the translation of a Greek word which means, "to guard or protect by a military guard, either in order to prevent hostile invasion, or to keep the inhabitants of a besieged city from flight." Figuratively, the word means, "to protect by guarding." Paul is saying that the Law was a jailer who held those who were subjected to sin in custody, in order that they should not escape the consciousness of their sins and their liability to punishment. They were "*imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.*"

The Greek word translated "*until*" is not temporal in its significance, having the idea of "up to the time that," or "when." The word means, "with a view to." Paul is explaining that sinners were kept guarded under the Law with a view to their exercising faith in Christ. The Law shut them up to one avenue of escape, namely, faith in Christ, for during the approximately 1500 years in which it was in force, it was the means of convicting sinners of their sins and of causing them to look ahead in faith to the atonement God would one day offer which would pay for their sins. These sinners were saved by the blood of Christ just as surely and just as eternally as believing sinners since the Cross. But when the faith in an historic Christ came, that is, a faith exercised in the Christ of history rather than in the Christ of prophecy, then the Law was abrogated. It was done away with forever. In other words, the Law functions like a prison guard who keeps the prisoners of sin under guard until faith opens the floodgates of heaven's grace to them by faith.

The English theologian **W. E. Vine** noted that,

"Until the revelation was made there was no way of escape from the strict surveillance and the unrelenting condemnation of the law. But when Christ came He led out from that fold all who heard His voice and followed Him, and to them He gave eternal life...as a free, unearned gift."

Brothers and sisters, Law and grace may be miles apart from each other in essence, but in our hearts, they are close together. In our hearts fear and trust, sin and grace, works and faith cross paths continually. I believe that each of us experience in our inner-heart lives, seasons of the Law and seasons of grace. In the seasons of the Law we experience doubt, fear, heaviness of heart, and feelings of despair and even condemnation because of our sins. We find fault with God, we are impatient with Him and we even speak against Him and refrain from prayer. In the seasons of grace, we experience joy and peace as we rest in His promises, and the implications of the Doctrines of Grace overwhelm and comfort us.

These contrasting seasons of the Law and grace will come again and again as long as we live. However, as we obey the imperative in **Ephesians 5:18**, to be "*be filled with the Spirit,*" by obeying the imperative in **Colossians 3:16** to allow the word of Christ to " *dwell in [us] richly,*" we will increasingly be enabled to "*walk by the Spirit*" (**Galatians 5:16**), and the "*fruit of the Spirit*" -love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, will increasingly be produced in our hearts and manifested in our lives. The end result of all this is that we will experience seasons of grace more and more, and seasons of the Law less and less.

In verse **24**, Paul writes, "*So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*" In verses **22** and **23**, the Law was personified as a jailor shutting persons in a prison cell under a death sentence. In verse **24**, the Law is personified as a guardian or custodian. The Greek word is **paidagógos**: (**pahee-dag-o-gos'**),

which literally means a child leader. The word was used to refer to a legally appointed overseer, authorized to train up a child.

The **King James Version** translates the word as “*schoolmaster*,” but in this verse, the idea of instruction is absent. In this verse the idea is that of training and discipline, not of the impartation of knowledge. The **paidagógos** was not the instructor of the child; he exercised a general supervision over him and was responsible for his moral and physical well-being. To understand it as equivalent to a teacher introduces an idea entirely foreign to the passage, and confuses Paul’s argument.

paidagógos was usually a slave employed in Greek and Roman families who had the general charge over a boy in the years from about 6-16. He watched over his outward behaviour, and took charge over him whenever he went from home, as for instance, to school. This slave was entrusted with the moral supervision of the child. His duties were therefore quite distinct from those of a schoolmaster.

By describing the Law as a **paidagógos**, Paul emphasizes both the inferiority of the Law, and its temporary character. The role of the Law was that of a guardian to Israel, keeping watch over those committed to its care, accompanying them with its commands and prohibitions, keeping them in a condition of dependence and restraint, and continually revealing to them sin as a transgression of God’s expressed decrees. He says that, “*the law was our guardian **until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith.*”

The position of child guardian or custodian was a temporary one. When the son became an adult the responsibilities of the **paidagógos** were fulfilled. And so by way of analogy Paul is explaining that the Law kept watch over us and by showed us our sins, and by finally escorted us to Christ. Seeing in the Law the perfection of God and the imperfection of man, we realize how far short we fall of God’s glory. Even as the **paidagógos** was to ensure that the boy travelled safely to and from school, the Law supervised God’s people until the coming of Christ. In **Matthew 5:17-18**, our Lord said,

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

(English Standard Version)

John Stott noted that,

“We cannot come to Christ to be justified until we have first been to Moses to be condemned. But once we have gone to Moses, and acknowledged our sin, guilt and condemnation, we must not stay there. We must let Moses send us to Christ.”

As we stated earlier, it is misleading to equate the Law with a teacher in this connection. In Paul’s mind the teacher is Christ Himself. The Law is the slave who performs the humble task of bringing the child to Jesus, the teacher. The Judaizers wanted the Galatian believers to go back to the Law and make it their permanent **paidagógos**, but that was not far enough back for Paul! Paul wanted them to go back 430 years before the Law was given to Israel to the time of Abraham where the promise of justification by faith was given in **Genesis 15**. The Law came 430 years after Abraham was justified by faith and it did not annul the promise of salvation by grace through faith to all of Abrahams “spiritual” descendants whether Jew or Gentile. To the contrary the Law was given to reveal sin and to prepare the way for Christ to come and fulfill the promise.

Martin Luther commented that,

“The law does not lead us to another lawgiver requiring good works, but to Christ, our justifier and Saviour, so that we might be justified by faith in him, and not by works...The true function of the law is to bring me to the knowledge of my sin and to humble me, so that I may come to Christ and be justified by faith. But faith is neither law nor work, but an assured confidence that lays hold of Christ, who is the end of the

law (**Romans 10:4**). How? It is not that he has abolished the old law and given us a new one, or that he is a judge who must be pacified by what we do. He is the end of the law to all those who believe; that is to say, everyone who believes in him is righteous, and he will never accuse such people. The law, then, is good, holy, and just if we use it as we should."

We will give the "**Prince of Preachers,**" **Charles Spurgeon**, the last word this evening:

"If you are a Christian, you must never go back to the law. Do not begin to judge yourself as if you were under the law. What if you are a sinner? It is true, you are. Confess your sin and mourn over it, but remember there is a fountain open for sin and for uncleanness. That sin of yours was laid on Christ before you committed it. It was laid on the scapegoat's head and put away. At this moment you are still clean in the sight of God through that great washing that you have received in the precious blood. Do not imagine that God will change His mind about you; He never did and never can change His mind. He has said concerning each soul that believes in His dear Son, "*He who believes in Him is not condemned.*" You are complete in Christ Jesus. In Him you have righteousness and strength; in Him you may even glory. Get away from legal doctrines, and stand upon the gospel rock, and you will be happy and holy all your days."