

“Why Then the Law?”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Text: Galatians 3:15-25; Exodus 24:1-18

One of the best ways to refute error is to proclaim the truth. This is what Paul does throughout the Book of Galatians. The error Paul must refute is doctrinal and public. A group of false teachers, the Judaizers, had come to the Galatians shortly after Paul had left the region. They challenged Paul's authority and began undermining the gospel which the Apostle had preached previously. The Judaizers were zealous for the law and the tradition of their fathers. When Gentiles responded to the gospel after Paul preached it to them, and then came to faith in Jesus Christ, the Judaizers became insistent that these Gentiles believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but, they added, Gentile converts must also submit to ritual circumcision, keep certain dietary laws, and obey the law of Moses. If they failed to do so, they would forfeit their right standing before God. This was the great error of the Judaizers; faith in Christ, plus . . .

Publically placarding Jesus Christ crucified before his hearer's eyes through his preaching (Gal. 3:1), the truth is also out in the open. Justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ (“hearing with faith” as Paul calls it), not through obedience to the law of Moses, not through submission to ritual circumcision, or through keeping dietary laws. The blessings of the promise that God made to Abraham comes to all of Abraham's children—whether Jew or Gentile—through faith and not by works. This is Paul's gospel.

Paul was angry about the errors of the Judaizers. He was also angry at their deceptive methods. Apparently, the Judaizers were infiltrating the Galatian churches and spying on Gentiles exercising their freedom in Christ. Any possible instance of the abuse of Christian liberty was turned into an argument against Paul's gospel. As Paul saw it, since we are justified (given a right standing before God) by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, any departure from this gospel was a different gospel, which is no gospel. Paul's gospel had been revealed to him personally by Jesus Christ, and it was through this same gospel the Galatians had trusted in Christ alone through the “hearing with faith,” the means by which the Galatians received the Holy Spirit and witnessed God work miracles in their midst.

Making his case that justification and God's promise to Abraham (the gift of the Holy Spirit) both come to Abraham's children through faith alone, in verses 15-18 of Galatians 3, Paul points out that even though the promise to Abraham was given chronologically prior to giving of law to Moses, this does not mean that the law nullifies the prior Abrahamic promise. After discussing the death of Christ in verses 12-13—Jesus Christ become a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of the law, bearing that curse for us in his own body hanging upon the cross (tree), so that Jew and Gentile alike can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit—Paul moves on in verses 15-18 to discuss the nature of the promise and its connection to the different covenants made with Abraham and Moses. Paul will give a lesson in redemptive history.

Using Abraham as his example, Paul is able to prove that his understanding of the gospel which is centered in the public placarding of Christ crucified for sinners, is the very same gospel that God preached in advance to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15:6. Paul is no innovator. The promise God gave to Abraham that he would justify Abraham and all of his spiritual children, Jew and Gentile, through faith alone, is the same gospel taught throughout the Old Testament. The substance of the promise was that through the means of faith, God would give the children of Abraham the gift of the Holy Spirit and so having received the Holy Spirit, they were now heirs to the promise.

Paul's main point in this section is really a simple one. The promise given to Abraham as recounted in Genesis 17, preceded in time God's giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The law cannot nullify the promise. In Galatians 3:15, Paul puts it this way. "*To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.*" Paul's example points to the covenant (*diatheke*) which God had previously established with Abraham as recounted in Genesis 15-17. This first covenant cannot be set aside by a later covenant, because the covenant God made with Abraham is unconditional in the sense that it is God himself who swears the oath to Abraham to bring to pass what is promised—"I will be your God and you and your descendants after you will be my people."

How, then, can the Judaizers argue that obedience to the law of Moses and submission to circumcision nullifies the prior covenant in which God himself swore on oath to be faithful to his promises? All the more problematic is that the Abrahamic covenant was duly ratified by Abraham through the sign and seal of circumcision. How can something that has been properly ratified be set aside by a later covenant with Moses? There are no legal grounds for overturning this covenant. The Judaizers find themselves in the precarious situation of proving that the giving of the law of Moses overturned and nullified the previous covenant that God made with Abraham. This is especially problematic when the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant which God himself not only initiates, but one in which God himself swears the covenant oath. If YHWH fails to keep his promises, the covenant curses come down upon him.

In verse 16, Paul makes a careful appeal to the nature of the promise. "*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ.*" The plural "promises" are, in this case, the promises of a land given to Abraham, and his descendants as an everlasting possession in Genesis (see 12:7; 13:15; 15:7; 17:8). "Paul doubtless understands this in a spiritual sense, although he does not pause to make this explicit."¹ This becomes clear when we note Paul's comments in Romans 4:13, where Paul extends this everlasting promise of a "land" (between the Euphrates and the Red Sea) to include entire "the world."

When Paul contends that Christ is the promised "seed" (singular) Christ himself is the true heir of the promise, and the guarantor that the promise would be fulfilled. In his death for sinners (becoming a curse) our Lord ensured that this would come to pass, since the only thing that could prevent the promise from being realized is the guilt of our sin, which our Lord himself has removed by becoming a curse for us. As Paul will point out in verse 29, it is Jesus Christ, Israel's promised Messiah, who extends the promise to his own seed, those who trust in him (v. 26) and who are baptized into his name (v. 29).

Paul gives more clarification in verse 17: "*This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.*" Paul is using the standard rabbinic reckoning of the years counted between Abraham and Moses. His basic argument is that the covenant with Moses (the so-called Mosaic or Sinai covenant centered in the law) does not overturn the previous covenant already made, ratified and established by God, in this case, the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham.

In fact, it is clear from Exodus 24, that this later covenant made with Moses is radically different from the prior covenant made with Abraham, since in the covenant God made with Moses, the people

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, 155.

themselves swore the oath of ratification to the terms of the covenant, not God.² In Exodus 24:3 (from our Old Testament lesson) we read: “*Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.’*” The law of Moses and the covenant at Sinai must be interpreted in light of the covenant with Abraham and not vice-versa. Paul will need to show his opponents what the law was and was not intended to do—a point he will take up in verses 21-22.

In verse 18, Paul reminds the Judaizers “*if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*” God gave this promise to Abraham, who received it through faith alone. Since Abraham was justified by faith in God’s promise (v. 6), so the “men of faith” are the true children of Abraham (v. 7) and will inherit Abraham’s blessing (v. 9). All of this comes to pass through the means of faith and not by works! Calvin’s comments are appropriate here,

Beyond all doubt Paul excludes works of every kind. Thus in Rom. 4:14, “if inheritance is by the law, faith is abolished and the promise made of none effect.” Why so? Because salvation would depend upon the condition of satisfying the law. Therefore he immediately concludes that it is by faith, so that the promise might be sure. Let us carefully remember why, when the promise is compared with law, the establishment of the one overturns the other: because the promise has respect to faith and the law to works. Faith receives what is freely given, but to works a reward is paid.³

This is the criterion, according to Calvin, for distinguishing between the so-called “second” and “third” uses of the law. According to its second use, the law is contrary to faith and should serve only to drive us to despair of our own righteousness, and therefore to Christ for forgiveness. In this sense, the law can be said to be “a teacher of sin.”⁴ But the law is a revelation of the will of God, and according to the “third” use, the Christian is to obey the law out of gratitude for what God has done for the believer in Christ.⁵ In this sense, then, the law is the rule of gratitude. It is absolutely vital to keep these two uses of the law clearly in view so that we do not turn gospel into law and law into gospel, and so that we do not tolerate either antinomianism or licentiousness, as well as any form of legalism along the lines of the Judaizers.

But if the law cannot justify, and if the promise cannot come through obedience to the law, why, then, *did* God give the law? Paul answers this in verses 19-22, when discussing the true purpose of the law. Having told us what the law *cannot* do, Paul must explain what the law *can* do. Since we are justified through faith alone and not by obedience to law, and since the blessings of the promise are received through faith, and the law does not nullify the promise, what value or role then, does the law have for the Galatian Christians? Paul must show from redemptive history why the law was given, as well as demonstrate to his hearers what role the law plays for the Christian.

Since Paul has made it clear that obedience to law cannot justify or serve as the basis for receiving the promise, In verse 19, he asks, “*Why then the law?*” Before answering his own question—“*It was added*

² Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Eerdmans, 1968), 17.

³ Calvin, *Galatians*, p. 60.

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 3-5.

⁵ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 113-115.

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.” The answer points to five reasons as to why the law does not nullify the promise.⁶

First, Paul is not giving us the *cause* as to why God gave the Law, “because of transgressions,” but instead, Paul is revealing to us the effect of God’s giving of the law, literally “to make wrongdoing a legal offense.” The law was not given to us to correct our sinfulness. Rather, the law was given to expose our sinfulness and render us “guilty.” This is a frequent theme throughout Paul’s writings. The law exposes our sin and brings it to light as a transgression of God’s will on the one hand (Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13) while and on the other, law stimulates sin to even greater action and guilt (Romans 7:7 ff) than when law is not present. The law was given to show us what sin is, as well as to excite and exacerbate sin within us. This is why legalism is so dangerous and undermines the gospel, and why legalism is so ineffective in combating sin. The law was given to us to show us how sinful we really are!

Second, says Paul, the Law was added “*until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made*” (v. 19). This reminds us that the law and the covenant God made with Moses was added for a specific time and for a specific purpose, namely so that the trespass might increase, demonstrating human sinfulness, a point that Paul will discuss in more detail in verses 23-25. Even though the covenant with Moses was in force for a limited time (until the coming of Christ) and for a specific purpose (to expose our sin and prepare us for Christ’s appearance), we need to remember that all ten of the Ten Commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament as binding upon the Christian. The law still functions as both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.

Third, the law “*it was put in place through angels by an intermediary*” (v. 19 c). There are two “inferior” parties mentioned, the angels and a mediator, likely a reference to Moses. According to one commentator, “the role of angels as God’s assistants in the promulgation of the law is employed in Jewish and early Christian tradition to enhance the glory of the law (Dt. 33:2, LXX; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb. 2:2). Here in Galatians, however...it is used to show the inferiority of the law as that which was given not directly by God but only through angelic mediation.”⁷

As far as the mediator goes, Paul certainly has Moses in mind, especially in light of the comments made about Moses’ role as mediator for the people of God throughout the book of Deuteronomy (Ex. 20:19; Dt. 5:5, 23-27). In the context of refuting the specific arguments of the Judaizers, Paul is pointing out that the law was given to the people through indirect, intermediary means, rather than directly from God, as in the case of the promise made to Abraham. In this sense, Paul says the law is inferior to the promise.

The fourth reason Paul gives in verse 20, is that “*an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.*” is variously and problematically interpreted. Paul’s point is probably to correct the notion that the very idea of mediation implies that there are two equal parties who participate in the transaction, as the people of God swear the oath in response to the giving of the law. In the Abrahamic covenant, God sovereignly imposes the terms and swears the oath himself, thus the promise is superior to the law.

The fifth reason is given in verse 21. “*Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not!*”

⁶ Fung, Galatians, 159.

⁷ Fung, Galatians, 161.

For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.” Paul asks a rhetorical question. Is the law opposed to the promises of God? That is, if the law is inferior to the promise, does that mean that law somehow contradicts the promise or nullifies it? This is an important point. Paul’s answer to this is the emphatic, “absolutely not.” In Paul’s argument here, as elsewhere in Galatians, law has both a *positive* and a *negative* function.

Negatively, the law cannot impart life, because the law is contrary to faith and brings the full weight of God’s curse down upon every violator of any one of its stipulations. The law is not contrary to the promise because the true purpose of the law is not to bring life but death. The problem in the Galatian church has arisen because the Judaizers were misrepresenting the law’s true purpose. The Judaizers saw law as consistent with faith and obedience to it as a means of justification and the basis for gaining the promise. In their view, the covenant with Moses (which came later) was superior to the covenant with Abraham, when, in fact, the opposite was true. When the Judaizers affirm the priority and superiority of the law, ironically, they not only end up denying the promise, but they end up denying the true purpose of the law. Hence the purpose of both law and gospel are misrepresented by the Judaizers.

The positive purpose for the law is spelled out in verse 22. *“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 case, the law serves to imprison the world under sin. God, who speaks through the Scriptures, “locks up all men under the condemnation of sin, providing them with no possibility of escape.”⁸ The reason that God gave the law is to show that all men and women are the children of Adam, who constantly and consistently, whether in thought, word and deed, willfully, and continuously, violate the revealed will of God, taking them captive to the bondage of sin. The law renders all of us “prisoners” of sin, when there is no redemption from its curse.

Paul connects this function of the law with the reception of the promise through faith. Since the whole world is held captive to sin, the contrast with the promise is clear. The law which brings a curse points us to the promise, which is only received through faith alone—“what was promised, being given through faith in Christ Jesus, might be given to those who believe.” Paul has demonstrated that the fulfillment of the promise comes through the covenant made with Abraham, not through the covenant made with Moses. The law is inferior to the promise, and brings a curse upon the whole world, not blessing, since when we sin, we break the law and come under its curse. The “Judaizers were wrong . . . to impose new conditions for salvation (“add a codicil”) upon the original covenant of promise, which cannot be rendered null and void (“set...aside”) in this way.”⁹ They not only misunderstood the covenant with Abraham, they misunderstood the covenant made with Moses.

Following the familiar theme of God’s purposes being clearly seen in and through redemptive history, Paul sets out to show the place of the law in redemptive history in verses 23-25. In verse 23, we read, *“now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.”* Paul reinforces the argument of the previous verses (especially v. 22) where we were told that the whole world was a prisoner to sin. The law held us captive (as prisoners) until the coming of Christ. It was for this purpose that God gave us the law! This reinforces the idea that the law exposes and excites sin, thereby showing us our need of a savior who can redeem us from the curse of the law by

⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 164.

⁹ Fung, *Galatians*, 166.

becoming a curse, bearing the penalty for our every infraction of the law (cf. Romans 7:7 ff).

In addition to our need for forgiveness, we need a Savior who himself kept the law perfectly so that his righteousness can be reckoned to us. “The coming of faith is therefore, identical with the coming of Christ, who is the object of faith; it is the coming of Christ, making possible the coming of faith.”¹⁰ God is working out human history for the ultimate purpose of redeeming his elect and glorifying his name.

In verse 24, Paul introduces the oft-discussed notion that the law is a schoolmaster [guardian]. “*So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*” The term *paidagogos* [guardian] has an interesting background. The *paidagogos* was a trusted slave who ensured that the children of upper class Greeks and Romans went to and from school (tutors) and behaved themselves. Paul understands the law to exercise a similar function. With the coming of Jesus Christ and the “hearing of faith,” we now see that the law functioned as that stern supervisor ensuring that we come to Christ for our justification.¹¹

This is what has come to be known as the “second” or theological use of the law, in which the purpose of the law is to serve as a harsh schoolmaster, to give us no rest or confidence in our self-righteousness and obedience to the law, until we seek the grace of God in Christ. The law in this sense is a stern tutor, which guides us and regulates us, exposing our sin, until the coming of Christ, so that the superiority of faith and the promise can be clearly seen.

But in verse 25, Paul points out that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there has been a significant change in redemptive history, seen in the fact that “*now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*” Since faith has come, no longer are we under this stern tutelage of the *paidagogos*. The law has accomplished its purpose. It has prepared the way for the coming of Christ and faith by showing us how we are enslaved to sin and in desperate need of forgiveness. The law is not opposed to the promise and does not nullify it—this a point we will continue to explore in the coming weeks.

In light of Paul’s exposure of the Judaizer’s misunderstanding of redemptive history, our application centers around the question, “why the law?” No doubt, the law serves a very important purpose, but we must be very clear as to what that purpose is. In Galatians 3:15-25, Paul tells us that one purpose of the law is to show us that we need a savior! In this case, the law functions as a stern tutor. The law holds us prisoner to sin until we embrace Christ through faith. The law accomplishes its purpose when we see how sinful we really are.

When we consider the law from this perspective—the so-called “second” or “theological” use of the law—a number of things must be said. First, it should be absolutely clear that there will be no one in heaven because they kept the law or somehow earned God’s favor through their good works or through their obedience. The law was not given to bring life, it was given to bring a curse and death. What this means is that when we die and stand before God in the judgement, God will not compare us to others, he will not inquire about our sincerity, nor will he cut us any slack if we tried our hardest to be good people.

God will measure us against the standard found in his law. He will demand perfect obedience to every

¹⁰ Fung, *Galatians*, 168.

¹¹ Fung, *Galatians*, 169-170.

command. In this sense, the law is like a ten-link chain. Break but a single link and the whole chain is useless. Even a single infraction of that law means that we will hear these frightening words— “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’*” (cf. Matthew 7:21-23). God will not let us into heaven on the basis of our deeds, since all of them are tainted by sin. He will not let us in if we try our best, because anything not done from the perspective of faith is sin.

If your response to this is despair, “well then, who can go to heaven?” the law has done its work. This is why God gave the law, to show us that we cannot go to heaven on the basis of anything in us or because of anything that we have done. In the words of one preacher, we must see the law like a mirror. We look in the mirror and we see we are dirty. The mirror shows us our true condition, driving us to the soap and water. We don’t take the mirror down off the wall and attempt to clean ourselves with the mirror! So it is with the law. The law shows us that we need Christ. This, then, is “why the law?”

Second, Paul is clear that the law will do its work and make all of us prisoners of sin. Paul is equally clear that Christ has now come, the one to whom the law pointed. Christ became a curse for us. He loved us and gave himself for us so that God can forgive our sins and grant us entrance into heaven. By dying for us, Jesus Christ is punished for our each and every infraction of God’s law. He was punished for every sin that we have ever committed or will ever commit. There is no more gracious an act conceivable by the human mind. It is only in the cross that any of us have any hope of heaven.

By trusting in Jesus Christ through faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sin. We also see that Jesus Christ kept the law of Moses perfectly during his earthly life. When we renounce our own righteousness and place our trust in Jesus Christ, God places our sins upon Jesus, who becomes a curse, paying for our sins. Through that same faith, God imputes or reckons to us the perfect righteousness of the Son of God. God sees us as though we had never sinned and as though we had kept the law of Moses perfectly, even though we remain sinners.

This, then, is Paul’s gospel. To argue as the Judaizers were doing, that we must add our obedience to the death and righteousness of Christ is to deny that the death and righteousness of Christ is sufficient to save. The *Belgic Confession* puts it this way: “to say that Christ is not enough but that something else is needed as well is a most blasphemy against God—for it would then follow that Jesus Christ is only half a Savior” (*Article 22*). It is to say that God must accept us on the basis of our own righteousness. This denies the covenant promises that God made to Abraham (which demands the “hearing with faith”), and this distorts the meaning of the covenant God made with Moses in the giving of the law which does not nullify, or redefine the prior covenant made with Abraham. Both of these covenants point us to Jesus Christ and his obedience and curse bearing, not our own merit earned by our own obedience.

What God promised to give his people—the forgiveness of sin, a righteousness which justifies, the blessings of the promise given to Abraham’s children, the gift of the Holy Spirit—are freely given to those who trust the Savior, that seed to whom the promise referred. The person who trusts in Christ alone is regarded by God as though they themselves had perfectly obeyed the law and as though had never sinned. This is why the law does not nullify the promise. And this is the answer to that question, “why, the law?” For what God demands under the law (perfect obedience) he has freely given us in Christ! And Christ and his righteousness is received through faith alone! Amen!