

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FORTY-FIVE)

“THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW”

GALATIANS 3:19

(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.

In previous Lessons, we have stated that in **Galatians 3:15-18**, Paul argues that the blessing of Abraham-justification by faith, inclusive of the receipt of the Holy Spirit, was covenanted to Abraham before the Law was given. Therefore, the Law could not annul or modify that which was done by God prior to its introduction.

Paul emphasizes the pre-eminence of faith through an appeal to the chronological sequence of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. He argues that since man-made agreements are not cancelled or changed once they have been ratified or “signed off” on, how much more are the covenants of God unchangeable? Long before ratifying His covenant with Moses, God promised an inheritance to Abraham, and nothing can add to that or change it. If Abraham and his offspring receive it by faith alone, then it is received by faith alone forever, no matter what any later covenant may stipulate.

In verse **19**, Paul proceeds to answer the argument that if the Law was never given as a means of salvation, then that fact leaves the Law without any apparent reason for existence. He knew that the Galatian believers, and particularly the Jewish ones, would be wondering what

the purpose of the Law was since it was not a means of salvation. So he pre-empted their question with his own question, “*Why then the law?*” In other words, Paul is asking, “What then was the purpose of the Law?” If salvation has always been by grace through faith, why then did God bring in the Law 430 years after making a covenant with Abraham? Paul will go on to argue that the Law was not given to save the sinner, but to condemn the sinner, so that he or she might realize his or her need for the grace of God!

One commentator has stated that Paul made four distinct observations about the Law in **Galatians 3**:

The Law could not give the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 3:1-5**).

The Law could not give righteousness (**Galatians 3:6-9**).

The Law could not justify; it could only condemn (**Galatians 3:10-12**).

The Law could not change the fact that righteousness always comes by faith in God’s promises (**Galatians 3:15-18**).

Brothers and sisters, the Law could not justify, sanctify, nor satisfy any human being. All that the Law could do was to show human beings the exceeding sinfulness and hopelessness of their condition without the grace of God!

“What then was the purpose of the Law?” Paul answers his own question. He says, “*It was added because of transgressions.*” The word “*added*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to put to, to add, to gather with, to place alongside.” The idea is of adding to something that is already present.

The word “*added*” clearly implies that something preceded the Law. To what was the Law added? In the context of **Galatians 3**, the Law was added to the Promise of God given to Abraham. When was the Law added? We have the answer in **John 1:17**: “*For the law was given*

through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (English Standard Version).

John could not have stated it more plainly. The Law was given at a specific time to a specific people. It was delivered by Moses to Israel as he received it from Almighty God on Mount Sinai. 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.

In **Romans 5:20**, Paul writes, “*Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*” The words, “*came in*” are the translation of a Greek word which means, “to come in secretly or by stealth, to creep or steal in.” 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.*” The phrase “*because of*” is the translation of a Greek word which may speak to either **cause** or **purpose**. If Paul’s intention is for the phrase to be understood **causally**, his meaning would be that the Law was given **because** the sinfulness of humanity was so great. In other words, the Law was given to act as a restraint on the sinfulness of mankind. However, it is more consistent with Paul’s thought in this verse and elsewhere, to understand the word as indicating **purpose**. Paul is arguing here 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. In **Romans 4:15**, Paul writes, “*For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression*” (**English Standard Version**).

This understanding fits well with Paul's emphasis in this passage, for he is engaged in showing that the Law did not make men and women righteous but rather served to condemn them. As **John Stott** observed,

"The function of the law was not to bestow salvation...but to convince men of their need of it."

In **Romans 7:7-12**, Paul gives a similar explanation regarding the purpose of the Law. The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows:

7 Well then, am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful? Of course not! In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet."

8 But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me! If there were no law, sin would not have that power.

9 At one time I lived without understanding the law. But when I learned the command not to covet, for instance, the power of sin came to life,

10 and I died. So I discovered that the law's commands, which were supposed to bring life, brought spiritual death instead.

11 Sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me; it used the commands to kill me.

12 But still, the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good.

In **1 Corinthians 15:56**, Paul writes, "*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law*" (**English Standard Version**).

Paul is saying in this verse that it is the Law which gives sin its power. How is it that the Law gives sin power? One commentator provides the following explanation:

"Think about what the law does to the fallen flesh. Tell your flesh 'I'm not going to do 'x' for the entire week.' What have you just done to yourself? In effect you have placed yourself under the law (one you declared, but law nevertheless). And the moment you fall into this trap of legalistic obedience, it won't be long before you experience failure and frustration."

Brothers and sisters, the effect of the Law is to stimulate sin. All that the Law can do with sin is to stir it up! The Law does not commend us for doing our best to live holy lives. The Law demands absolute obedience and it condemns anything that falls short of absolute perfection. This is why sin is so powerful, because we always fall short of the glory of God.

This is why we need to be very cautious and hesitant in making a list of "Do's and Don't's" in an attempt to try to "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" We are destined for defeat if we try to suppress the desires of the sinful, unregenerate, adamic nature, or the "flesh" by resorting to legalism, because legalism inevitably arouses the "flesh." It does not suppress it. God has provided us with a far superior method of battling sin. That superior method is the Holy Spirit.

In **Romans 8:13**, Paul write, "*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*" (**English Standard Version**). We need to learn to rely on the Spirit, not on self to control "self."

Brothers and sisters, the law of God is holy and just and good. But it becomes a very great evil when it is perverted and used for something other than its divine purpose.

The Greek word translated "*transgressions*" is **parabasis**: (**par-ab'-as-is**), which literally means, "going over." Figuratively, the word means "disregarding, violating." It refers to the act of a person stepping beyond a fixed limit into forbidden territory. In the New Testament **parabasis** always implies a breach of law and especially of the Law of Moses.

The Greek word that is translated “sin” in the New Testament is **hamartia**: (**ham-ar-tee’-ah**), which in classical Greek meant “a failing to hit the mark.” It was used of a person who failed to hit a target. Thus, the word implies a deviation from the right course of action. But **hamartia** never had the idea of a **willful transgression** or overstepping of limitations with reference to conduct imposed by the deity.

The word that Paul uses in verse **19**, to indicate the purpose of the giving of the Law is not **hamartia** (a failing to hit the mark), but **parabasis** (a violation of the rights of others, or of limitations imposed upon one). Before the Law was given by Moses to Israel, the wrong doing of human beings was recognized as **hamartia**, sin, a deviation from the course of right conduct. But when the Law was given, sin was seen to be, not merely the following of evil impulses, but as **parabasis**, 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. As **Kenneth Wuest** explains,

“The Law was not given because of the **existence** of transgressions, but to show sin in its true light, an overstepping of what is right into the realm of what is wrong. This revelation of the true nature of sin, would cause man to fear God’s wrath, which in turn would give strength to the weakness of man’s moral sense and thus educate his conscience and make it more sensitive to sin...The law was given therefore to set the stamp of positive transgression upon already existing sin. It was not to give the knowledge of sin as sin, but to show that it was a violation of God’s commandments.”

Brothers and sisters, is it not ironic that Satan encourages men and women to prove themselves to be **holy** by a strict observance of some principle of religious law, when the reason that God gave the Law was to prove men and women to be **sinner**s? According to **John Calvin**,

"The [role] of the law is to show us the disease in such a way that it shows us no hope of cure; whereas the [role] of the gospel is to bring a remedy to those who are past hope."

One Bible commentator makes the following insightful remarks:

"Christ has set us free, but as we attempt to live by faith, we are still in danger of falling into certain traps. Wanting the **security** of being able to earn our salvation, we add human traditions, standards, and rules to our faith. We slip back into performing a certain way, serving, or doing good works as if we need to impress God or earn his approval. And wanting to feel good, we let ourselves be directed by our ever-changing **emotions**. The **security trap** makes us prisoners just as surely as the law had held us in its grip. The **emotional trap** can result in our becoming 'outlaws,' deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong. Either way, we rob ourselves of the true joy and security we share with all who have accepted God's promise of salvation by faith alone."

Paul says that the Covenant of Law was brought in alongside the Abrahamic Covenant, "*until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.*" He is arguing 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.

When we examine the details of God's covenant with Abraham, we find no "ifs" in God's words. In other words, it was an **unconditional** covenant, which is another way of saying that it was all of **grace**. But the blessings of the Law were dependent on the meeting of certain conditions by those to whom it was given. It was a **conditional** covenant, which is another way of saying that it was all of **works**. Furthermore, the Law had a termination point. With the death and resurrection of Christ, the "*offspring*" or seed, the Law was done away and now its righteous demands are fulfilled in us through the Holy Spirit according to **Romans 8:1-4**:

1 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.

2 And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

3 The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

4 He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

(New Living Translation)

When Christ came and died, the Veil of the Temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom, which marked a dramatic change in the way God was approached by men and women. It was no longer through the Law and human high priests, but now it was through grace and Christ our Great High Priest.

Regarding the temporary nature of the Law, **Kenneth Wuest** makes the following comments:

"Grace flowed full and free from Adam's time to Abraham's, and from Abraham's time to Moses', and from Moses' time to Paul's. And it flows full and free from Paul's time through the present, and will be in force as the **only** way in which God saves a sinner, until the Great White Throne. The **law** was merely in force from Moses' time to Christ's death on the Cross, **and even while it was in force, God saved sinners by pure grace.**

The covenant of promise is therefore of **permanent** validity, beginning before and continuing through the period of the law, and afterwards.

The law was a **temporary** provision brought in alongside of grace to show sinners their need of grace, from Moses' time to the Cross."

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. Speaking about the Law in verse **19**, Paul writes, "*and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.*" Paul is saying here that when God gave the Law to Israel, He did it by means of angels and through the mediation of Moses.

There are Old Testament passages which imply that the angels played a role in giving the Law. In **Deuteronomy 32:2**, for example we read that, "*The LORD came from Sinai and revealed himself to Israel from Seir. He appeared in splendor from Mount Paran, and came forth with ten thousand holy ones*" (**New English Translation**).

In **Psalm 68:17**, the psalmist declares, "*God has countless chariots; they number in the thousands. The Lord comes from Sinai in holy splendor*" (**New English Translation**).

In the New Testament, the mediation of the angels in the giving of the Law is more explicitly taught. In **Acts 7:51-53**, Stephen rebukes his accusers with the following words:

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,

53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." (**English Standard Version**)

In **Hebrews 2:1-3**, we read,

1 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,

3 how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard.

(English Standard Version)

It is clear that in some mysterious way, the angels were involved in the giving of the Law.

Moses was also an intermediary as it relates to the giving of the Law. His role was not that of a mediator who worked for compromise between opposing parties. He was instead God's representative to his people Israel, enabling them to have a relationship with God which was entirely on God's terms.

The fact that God gave the Law to Israel by means of angels and through the mediation of Moses, means that they 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. There could be but one conclusion: the covenant was greater than the Law.

Kenneth Wuest makes the following comments with which we will conclude our Lesson:

"At Sinai, the law was given through two intermediaries, angels and Moses. The people stood afar off. Grace says, 'Come nigh,' law says, 'Stand off.' The object of showing how the law was given, was to indicate the inferior and subordinate position of the law in comparison

to the superior position held by grace. The promise was given direct to Abraham, the law through two intermediaries, angels and Moses. Paul shows that the law does not, as the Judaizers claim, have as direct and positive a relation to the divine plan of salvation as does the promise. He also shows that it is only of transitory significance, whereas the promise has an eternal value and meaning."

