

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 9: If we're saved by faith alone, what's the point of the law? (3:15-22)

Numbers 23:19, **"God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?"**

1 Samuel 15:29, **"And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man, that He should have regret."**

Hebrews 6:18, **"So that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie..."**

When God makes a promise, He never goes back on it. Why? Because nothing could ever cause Him to regret His promise. God knows everything. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows every thought and every word and every action of everyone who has ever lived or will ever live. Nothing is outside of His control. Nothing has ever thwarted His plan. Nothing has ever caught Him by surprise. Nothing makes Him realize a lapse in judgment so that He would change His mind.

The question at the surface now concerns God's promise to Abraham that all of the nations will be blessed in him. Abraham was justified by faith alone, and all who place their faith in Christ alone are likewise counted righteous, counted as offspring of Abraham, sharing in his blessing. Everyone who will one day dwell in Heaven with the Lord Jesus Christ will be there because of their faith in the finished work of Christ alone. But how do we handle God's promise, and the necessity of the law? The one seems to cancel out the other. The one seems to make the other unnecessary.

This is the legal situation that Paul is handling in our text for this lesson. We have a promise from God to save souls by faith alone apart from the law (which does nothing more than condemn), and we have Judaizers who are promoting the necessary obedience to the law for righteousness. How do we balance the scales? Up to this point in the chapter 3, Paul has been proving from various angles that our justification comes only by faith and not by works. In lesson 7 we saw how Paul appealed to their religious experience, they could go back in their minds to when they heard the gospel and believed, and they could see with great clarity the sovereignty of God in their salvation. They trusted in Christ alone at first in their own lives. Then in our last lesson, we saw how Paul appealed to the Old Testament to show from scripture itself that justification has always been by faith alone. He began in Genesis, and he quoted the prophet Habakkuk and the book of Leviticus to prove his point. At this point in his case for faith alone, he turns to a human example, and speaks of the permanence of even a man-made covenant.

By "covenant", Paul doesn't have in mind a legal covenant that might be applicable in a business contract. What he is referring too here has more to do with what we might call today "the last will and testament". What do I mean by that? In a business contract, there are always two sides to the deal, *"You do this, and I'll give you that. If you fail to do this, the contract is broken."* When it comes to justification, this is precisely the type of deal the Judaizers were promoting. God has His part, and we have ours. Paul is speaking against such thinking, explaining it more along the lines of a last will and testament, *"Because you are my child, I promise to give you my estate and all of my possession one day."* Period. That's it! There's nothing that you can do to change the reality of your sonship. Once the testament is drawn up, it is permanent and irrevocable. The testament cannot be annulled, altered, amended or adjusted. Now, you can imagine the backlash that would have come against such a teaching. The Judaizers would have been screaming against such a covenant, since it would create

spiritual laziness in the believer, like a super-privileged kid who's never had a job in his life. Nevertheless, this is the language that Paul is speaking of.

Let's read again verse 15, **"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 appeals to their life experience, how they knew the permanence of even a man-made covenant. If those things were so, how much more secure is a covenant made by God? How much more permanent is the covenant that God made with Abraham? Paul's arguing from the lesser to the greater. Genesis 15:18 records, **"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land...'"** This is the covenant that Paul comparing to the modern-day covenants that the Galatians would be aware of. This covenant was more like a testament than a contract. The covenant was conditioned upon Abraham's continued belief in God, and also upon him having offspring one day. But the covenant was not hinged upon some performance of Abraham, it was a one-sided work of God. This covenant came with a list of unbreakable promises that God made to Abraham, and it was sealed in blood by a covenantal ceremony, see Genesis 15:9-10, 17-18. This animal sacrifice sealed the covenant, making it permanently binding. God's promise became a sure fulfillment one day from that moment forward.

Now perhaps you're wondering what any of this has to do with Paul's point in the letter? Surely his point is connected to the Galatians. What's he getting at? Let's read further to verse 16, **"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."** Paul is careful to connect the promise made by God to Abraham to be a Messianic promise to come from his lineage. We read the promise from Genesis 15:18, but there were many others. God had already told Abraham of this twice before, in Genesis 12:7, and in 13:15. Read what Abraham said himself in Genesis 24:7. In every instance, the word is recorded singularly, as 'offspring'. We should be careful to read it that way, and Paul saw the importance of drawing out that truth. How many times does the Word of God have to say something to make it true? Only once, but here we have multiple references. A truth that should leap off the page is Paul's handling of the Word of God as inerrant and infallible. He's not handling texts as guidelines, but is treating every word as though it is God-breathed and profitable to teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness.

In a sense, God's promise to Abraham is that He will bless his offspring, which will be more numerous than the sand on the shore and the stars in the sky. In that sense when we used the word "offspring", it was written in singular form, yet referred to an innumerable amount of people, and was biblically accurate. But that isn't Paul point here. Paul is telling us that the offspring is ultimately and finally, Christ. Without Christ no one is blessed, not even Abraham. God is making a covenant with God, through Abraham. The covenant that God made with Abraham was already always about Christ. It looked forward to, and hinged upon His life, death and resurrection in our place. Abraham knew from the beginning that God initiated, sustained, and accomplished redemption for His people through a future Mediator, through a future Messiah. Remember Galatians 3:8? **"And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"** Abraham knew the gospel! His hope was found in nothing less than a coming Messiah and His righteousness! He dared not trust the sweetest frame, but he wholly leaned on the Messiah's name! (Not quite as catchy as the hymn is sung today)

Paul's point in this letter than, is that this covenant with Abraham is completely relevant to the Galatians, and every other person who would place their faith in Christ completely. The "will and

testament” family blessing that God promised to Abraham by faith, completed in Christ, is available to everyone who is in Christ. The Jews thought that the promise was given to a bloodline, they were wrong. The promise was made to a spiritual bloodline—those who would believe God and trust in Him. The promise was really for Jesus Christ, and when we belong to Christ, the promise is ours too! It’s almost as if there was only one party to the covenant: Jesus Christ. This was the danger before the Galatians, it’s almost as if they forgot the whole thing. Not trusting in Christ, they were being persuaded to trust in their obedience to the law. The church was separating itself into racial divides rather than uniting in Christ.

God Promised long before the law ever “saved”

“Promise” is the theme of the rest of this chapter, we’ll read the word eight more times. Paul has already established the permanence of the covenant. Then he established the party to the covenant: Jesus Christ. God making a covenant and sealing it ultimately with the blood of Christ. Now Paul establishes the promise of God, highlighting the timing of covenant. 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.”** Now Paul handles promise of God’s covenant, and the law He gave centuries later, in order to balance them. The issue at hand seemed to pit them against each other as incompatible. Paul’s effort here will show that although the covenant and the law are separate, they are complementary. They complement each other, they exist in the same world, they originate from the same God, but they function differently. God’s covenant deals with faith, the law deals with works. The covenant has everything to do with what God will do, while the law has everything to do with what we do. When God made the covenant with Abraham, the language was always, “I will, I will, I will” but with the law God said, “You will, you will, you will.” The covenant spoke of God’s sovereignty, God’s plan and will, God’s grace and mercy. The law speaks of man’s responsibility to love God and obey His commandments.

God’s promise, and the law, are different. They’re not competing truths. They don’t oppose each other, they’re not even two sides of the same coin. They are two truths that complement one another. That being said, they are not equal truths. What I mean by that is—one truth submits to the other. Perhaps the institution of marriage can help us to understand. A husband and wife are completely different by God’s good design, to piece together in a complementary way to form a union. Yet within that union, God has placed the man over the woman as a servant-leader, and given the wife the task of submitting to the God-given leadership of her husband. No one who understands the biblical picture of marriage looks upon women as worthless or second-rate, they understand and appreciate the roles that God has designed for the proper function of marriage. It is a sin to suggest that two men, or two women would make for a better union, as that distorts the completeness of the function of a marriage. Both need to be present, and operating in their respective ways.

God’s promise and the law are just the same. For someone to say that the law is unnecessary is the equivalent of saying that the wife is no longer necessary in a marriage. It’s as though they are saying that the husband can function much better alone. The feminist movement today tears down the role, and the necessity of the husband. The feminist movements treats men as inferior, idiotic, and foolish. The feminist movement tells women to behave more like men. They want women to be the strength, the provider, the protector, and the head of the house. This movement has created a passive manhood in our culture today, a lazy manhood who submits to the wife’s direction. “Happy wife, happy life.” Our culture has obliterated the institution of marriage, and the God-designed roles of both people.

Homosexuality is not only encouraged, it's championed! Heterosexual relationships are so tainted as far as the roles are concerned that the majority of marriages are doomed to failure, even expected to fail. Thinking that is shaped by our culture forgets that there is a beauty in submissive godliness.

I'm off track. Let's get back to the point I'm trying to make! There is a place for the law. There is a purpose for the law. There is a beauty therefore in keeping the law, as it shows an adoration of God, and a desire to please and honor Him through our life. Keeping the law has its rightful place when it's not super-imposed over the covenant as a superior means of justification. That type of thinking is like the feminist movement which tries to usurp the role of the man. The imagery between the two is quite interesting I find. The point being is that the law is true, so long as it operates in submission to the covenantal promise of God to save, which it should. After all, even chronologically speaking, the law came long after the promise was made.

God gave His promise with Abraham (Gen. 17) centuries before He gave the law to Moses (cf. Exodus 19ff). Paul says in Galatians 3:17, **"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 specifically speaking against the teaching of the Judaizers. They were teaching that the law made an amendment to God's promise; that God operated in one manner from Abraham to Moses only until His law would add His requirements from the people. They taught that God therefore dealt with Abraham by faith since He had no law for Abraham to follow, but with the law things changed, and now God deals with people through works. Paul says in verse 17 that the law **"does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void."** This is Paul's purpose of bringing up a legal example in verse 15. When a man makes a covenant everyone knows he can't go back on it. Even more so, God never goes back on a covenantal promise. God, very much in a "last will and testament" gave His promise of blessing to Abraham and his offspring, the law couldn't possibly amend that, replace that, supplement that, or annul that. So when we think of the law, we think of Moses, but when we think of the gospel, we think of Abraham. Through Moses God spoke the law, through Abraham came the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

While the law and the gospel come from the same God, and serve as a compliment to each other, only one saves. Justification can only be through one, for in the regard, the one cancels the other. Galatians 3:18, **"For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise."** It's logic! If your wealthy father left you all of his riches upon his death, than all of his riches are going to be yours upon his death. You wouldn't have to do anything to earn them, they're legally yours by contractual promise. In the same way, since God made a promise to Abraham, his word is sure and unchanging to all who are his offspring, the inheritance is not earned by keeping the law.

It's a difficult thing to get your head around: God has promised blessing to His people out of His grace and mercy, and it has absolutely nothing to do with my will or work. That was hard for the Jews to understand. It was hard for the former Pharisees to understand. It was hard for the Galatians to understand. It's still hard for us to understand. To help us along, we need to reflect on what it means to give a promise. Even more, we need to reflect upon what it means to receive a promise. If I promise to meet someone at noon tomorrow at the coffee shop, it's on me to be there. The responsibility is on me to keep my word. On the receiving end, the person I promised doesn't begin to work towards the end of assuring that I'll show up. (That doesn't even make sense) All that person has to do is trust my word that I'll fulfill the promise that I made. They will get ready and be there for noon, trusting they won't be

sitting alone. You receive a promise by faith alone, we all get that. It doesn't even make logical sense to receive a promise through works. The promise made by God to Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, and applied to us, is a start-to-finish work of God. Read [Romans 4:13-16](#).

God deals with His people, the manner in which He has established and maintains His relationship with His people is strictly according to the promise that He has made. Thankfully, God does not deal with us according to His law, because if He did, we would break that covenant before breakfast. God deals with us according to His promise, which He cannot break. God has promised eternal life to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our justification is promised to us through faith in Christ. That promise is to be believed in, trusting God knowing that He cannot lie. Our justification is a gift, not a paycheque. We receive the gift by faith, and then the natural fruit is that we live by our faith, we act upon our faith.

Galatians 3:19, **“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.”**

The law isn't void, it hasn't lost its purpose, its right where God intended it to be in His plan. What's the purpose of the law? Paul begins to explain by saying that it was added because of transgressions. What does that mean? At first glance, it seems as though God wrote the law to straighten out the sins of the people. We see that positive purpose of the law in our world today. Imagine if there were no consequences in our world for rape or murder or theft, the world would be chaotic. One of the purposes of the law is to deter people from fear of punishment. Perhaps you're proud of morality and know that you'd never kill or rape or steal regardless of the presence of the law, but I wonder how you'd drive if you knew there were no police around? I wonder how hard you'd work if you knew there was no boss around? A good theological position for a Christian to hold is one that understands the wicked depravity our hearts. We are not as good as we constantly tell ourselves that we are. The law does serve the purpose of keeping even the best of us in check.

But that's not what Paul is referring too here. There is another purpose, a higher purpose for the law. When Paul says that it was added because of transgressions, he's not referring to keeping the sinners in the right, he's referring to exposing the transgressions of 'good people'. Quite the opposite of lowering the sin count of people, the purpose of the law is to expose the high frequency of sin in people. This is what Paul meant in Romans 3:20, **“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** The purpose of the law then is to expose our guilt, and point us to the Saviour. Without the law we'd firmly believe that God loves us and is pleased to accept us into His kingdom just the way we are...which is the exact thinking of many 'Christians' today who 'love Jesus' but have never read the law or the gospel.

With the thinking then that the law serves the purpose of proving us guilty, and then pointing us to the promised Messiah who has conquered death and sin, and redeemed us, the law has a temporary purpose. In that sense, the law has a short and limited purpose. Even much of the law that was given through Moses is not in effect today because of the redemptive work of Christ. See [Hebrews 10:1-10](#).

So in one respect, the law is temporal. And in another respect, the law is still purposeful and active in the life of a believer. Paul will handle the necessity of living according to God's revealed standards in chapters 5 and 6 of this letter. There is a moral will of God that exists according to His character. That moral code has existed from eternity past, and will always exist. Nothing can exist before His presence

outside of His holy, moral code. For eternity future, we will all exist in a world that follows His moral law perfectly without even the possibility of failing. In that respect, the law of God is eternal.

“...until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.” We have already covered in this lesson who the “offspring” of Abraham is: Jesus Christ, God the Son. Here we see the temporality of the law as I just defined it a few paragraphs ago. The law was added for the purpose of exposing our sin, and the law was finished once Christ came, the One who came to whom the promise had been made.

Paul records how the law was put in place through angels by an intermediary. What’s the meaning of that? Why is that important? We should begin by searching the scripture to see the consistent teaching that in fact the angels were used in the giving of the law. Let’s look at Acts 7:51-53. Also Hebrews 2:1-4. The law was given through angels, by an intermediary, which of course is Moses. This is the way that God has chosen to reveal the law, from His mouth, through angels, through Moses, to His people. Galatians 3:20, **“Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.”** This was the necessary method since sinners cannot come before God’s presence. This wasn’t the case with the promise of God, the promise of God came directly from God audibly to Abraham. The covenantal promise came first and directly from God. Secondarily to the promise, and subservient to the promise came the law, put in place through angels by Moses. The law had its purpose, which pointed our need to Christ’ atoning work on Calvary.

Verse 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.”** I love the way that Paul argues against his points as he writes. The Holy Spirit knew the objections that would be raised against the truths of scripture and handles those objections right away. The objection from the teaching of this letter from Paul is that the law therefore must have no purpose and be against God’s will and purposes. This is basically another variation of the question that Paul raised in verse 19, **“Why then the law?”** Paul answers the objection that he figures people have concluded from the letter so far with a bold, **“Certainly not!”** The law isn’t at odds with the promise, they serve completely different purposes. The objections come when people start with the assumption that obedience to the law gives life, and the promise of God also gives life. If that’s the starting assumption, then Paul’s language makes it sound as if they’re competing or counter-productive to each other. But that’s never been the case. The promise of God is where life is found. The law has NEVER given life to anyone, not because the law isn’t capable, but because the sinner isn’t capable. There is only One who has perfectly obeyed the law, and He is the One to whom the promise to Moses was given, Jesus Christ. Christ is our great and only hope!

What is the purpose of the law? Paul has answered that the law cannot give life. All that the law does is reveal how sinful and desperate our wicked condition really is. Paul answered that the law is mediated to us third-hand through angels, then through Moses, pointing us towards the coming Messiah. So while Israel was failing God over and over again, and it looked as though God’s law was failing, it wasn’t, it was actually accomplishing exactly its purpose. The law exposed Israel’s wickedness and pointed them towards their Saviour from sin. Paul finishes his answer to the purpose of the law 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.”** The purpose of the law is to trap people in sin. The whole world, both Jew and Gentile, is imprisoned in sin. The whole world is guilty before the throne of God. The law points us to the mercy of God in Christ. The law is not against the promise, the law points directly at it!