

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Galatians</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>18</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Galatians 3:15-22</b>		
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### THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW AND THE PROMISE

Ernest Kevan, who served as principal of London Bible College from 1946 until his death in 1965, wrote a remarkable book entitled *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology*, in which he wrote: “All the Puritans were agreed, that, into whatever category the Mosaic Law had to be put, it was not given by God as a means of justification. The Law, coming 430 years after the promise, *cannot disannul* it and, therefore, is completely misunderstood if it is thought to be a system of merit. The Law was never a covenant of life; for *the Law given to Adam, and the Law received by Moses, are not one and the same*. The Law differs from itself, in that use which it had before, and which it hath since the Fall. . . . It was given to Adam for this end, to bring himself to Life. . . . But unto Man fallen, although the Band of Obedience doth remain; yet the End thereof (viz.). Justification and Life by it, is now abolished by the promise. The giving of the Law at Sinai is no more to be understood as a way of earning salvation, than the Lord’s words to the rich young ruler are to be so understood. Henry Burton denies the possibility that the Mosaic Covenant could provide a way of justification by works, and he conducts a study of the Covenant of Works in order to show how different it was from the Sinaitic Covenant. For the same reason, Anthony Burgess is at pains to demonstrate the opposition of the law of works to the law of faith, and to show that the Mosaic Law was never a *law of works*, in the sense of prescribing works for justification. It’s true in the Old Testament, the People were under tutors and bondage; but that was in regard of the carnal commandment of Ceremonies. . . . But Servile obedience through apprehension of legal terrors, was never commanded in the spiritual Law of God to the Jews, more than to us. The Jews were not justified by the works of the Law more than we. There is no hope of winning God’s favor by Law-keeping. Such an aim is not only beyond the reach of man, but reveals a failure to grasp the implications of the Fall.”<sup>1</sup>

Twice in Chapter 2 (verses 5 and 14), the Apostle Paul underscores “the truth of the gospel.” This so gripped him that he would not yield at any point – he would even rebuke a fellow apostle who was not walking “according to the truth of the gospel.” Paul would not sacrifice this important point even for the sake of what is falsely referred to as “Christian love.” While we are called to speak the truth *in love* (Ephesians 4:15), only love *in the truth* is God’s love. Much of what passes for “Christian love” is nothing more than sentimentalism that operates at only a superficial level. The Judaizers came preaching *another* gospel, one that put a premium on circumcision and the Law as the means of salvation. This Paul emphatically and categorically reputed. If one is not justified by the Law, then what purpose did it serve? Reformed theology, following John Calvin,<sup>2</sup> speaks of three functions of the law. First and foremost, it reveals, as a mirror, our sin and its curse. This is called the *theological* use of the law and is what Paul has in mind in Galatians 3:24. In the second place, the Law serves to protect the society from the unjust. This is called the *civil* use of the

Law. It serves as a deterrent to lawlessness. A society cannot survive that does not have law. Finally, the Law as its *principal use*<sup>3</sup> admonishes and exhorts moral behavior. This is the *moral* use of the Law. “The law was first given,” writes Michael Horton, “as a realistic expectation for human behavior because God created Adam and Eve with moral excellence. After the Fall, of course, human beings are incapable of conforming to this law. Even if they have not physically abused another person, they have murdered through gossip or slander. Even if they have not stolen from their neighbor by slipping into his home at night, they have not done everything they could do to protect their neighbor’s possessions. Even Christians cannot conform perfectly to this law, and they ought never to approach the law as though they could even come close to its moral excellence. Rather, believers ought to approach the law as the perfect standard God requires as the expression of His moral character and live, not in order to *meet* God’s requirements (for that is achieved only in Christ), but in order simply to *obey* God’s requirements. In the former approach, one sets out to *earn* God’s favor by *attaining* his own righteousness; in the latter, one sets out to obey a gracious heavenly Father simply because He has *already accepted* him or her as righteous and holy.”<sup>4</sup> The Law and its functions now become the focus of Paul’s attention. He will seek to show that the Christian gospel is directly connected with the promises made to Abraham. The gospel is grounded in *promise* not in the Law. We must not, however, think that this means that there is a fundamental conflict in the Word of God. God is not the author of confusion. The Law is from God and so are the Promises—but the two operate in different and complementary spheres. To understand them is to understand what Paul means by “the truth of the gospel.”

- I. ***THE VALIDITY OF THE PROMISE.*** You will remember that in the third chapter of Galatians, Paul is establishing his gospel with an argumentative strategy that has three stages. 3:1-5 forms the first stage, the argument from experience. 3:6-14 is the argument drawn from Scripture (Genesis 15:6). The final stage, 3:15-18, is the argument known as *exempla*. This is taken from the field of law in which some past action, real or assumed, may persuade the audience of the truth of the point which is under discussion.<sup>5</sup>
  - A. ***The Promises Made to Abraham*** (verses 15, 16). God made *unconditional* promises to the patriarch many years before Moses and the Law. Abraham was promised “a seed” (posterity), “a land” and “a great name.” Paul develops his argument by appealing to the well-known examples of contracts or wills (in verse 15, he uses the word DIATHÈKE, covenant). His point is simple—even among men we all recognize that once contracts are drawn up they cannot be modified—since this is true on the human level, then surely the covenant God made with Abraham (which was unilateral and entirely unconditional) is likewise unchangeable.
  - B. ***The Promises Fulfilled in Christ.*** “Every promise given in the covenant with Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> This point is underscored by the Apostle in his appealing to the singular use of the word seed (called a collective singular, cf. Genesis 4:25; 21:13; 1 Samuel 1:11; 2 Samuel 7:12).
  - C. ***The Later Addition: The Law of Moses*** (verses 17, 18). The Abrahamic covenant based on promise was never annulled. The inheritance, therefore, is not on the basis of law but on the promise and therefore on faith—given (the Greek word is *charizomai*, literally “to give graciously”) to Abraham by God.

- II. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW.** If the law must *add* something to the promise in order to bring it to fulfillment, then the promise as the unconditional grant of God’s salvation loses its gracious character—and the Law was never intended to supplement the promise.
- A. **The Question** (verse 19). Why then the Law? What is its significance? (The same issue is addressed by Paul in Romans 5:20-21).
- B. **The Answer** (verses 19, 20). The Law *was added* (brought in alongside of) the promise. Why? -- “because of transgressions.” This translation (both NIV and ESV) is incorrect. The Greek word *charin* may be causal or purposive (Romans 4:15 shows that it cannot be causal). It has a purposive sense “for the sake of transgressions” -- *i.e.* to show sin’s true character.
- III. THE HARMONY BETWEEN LAW AND PROMISE.** Is there a conflict between the two? *Far be it!* is Paul’s declaration. The Law serves as a judge upon man. It does not provide pardon and only condemns (and rightly so). The Law reveals sin (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:56). It *only* serves to demonstrate that fallen man cannot be justified by merit.

**CONCLUSION:** Richard Gaffin, one of my seminary professors, properly summarizes our passage. “Our interest in these verses is the references to faith and the arresting insight they provide into how controlling for Paul is his redemptive-historical outlook. In the broader context, 2:15-4:7, the main point is justification by faith and the related matter, it should not be missed, of the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit (3:2, 5); the two, the forensic and the renovative aspects of salvation, are never separated for Paul. The background here is the compromising and jeopardizing of the gospel among them by the insistence of some that circumcision is necessary for salvation. The main issue at stake in the passage, then, concerns the application of salvation, how salvation is received: is it *main issue at stake in the passage, then, concerns the application of salvation, how salvation is received: is it by works of the law, or by hearing with faith* (3:5)? In other words, this issue is an *ordo salutis* issue. Almost as obvious as this primary concern, however, is the redemptive-historical framework Paul brings to bear in dealing with it. This becomes especially clear beginning at 3:15. All along, Paul has been developing and driving home one key point, the central thesis advanced at the beginning of the section: *a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ* (2:16). This emphasis gives rise – inevitably we may say – to the question of the law, its origin and function. In this regard, Paul maintains that despite the unrelieved antithesis between whether salvation (justification) is received by doing the works of the law or through faith in Christ – an antithesis at the *ordo salutis* level – God’s giving of the law at Sinai is not contrary to his saving purpose. The law does not spring from some contrary motive; it is not a malevolent power. As Paul affirms elsewhere, *the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good; the law is spiritual* (Rom. 7:12, 14; cf. 7:13). The Mosaic law, coming as it does 430 years after the promises given to Abraham by the covenant God made with him, does not nullify but is for the sake of those promises (Gal. 3:17). The giving of the law is in the interests of bringing about their fulfillment and the realization of the inheritance promised to Abraham (3:18). In this respect, the law is a function of promise. Specifically, the law *was added because of transgressions* (Gal. 3:19; cf. Rom. 5:20; 7:13), in order to bring about the salvation in Christ promised to Abraham and his offspring (Gal. 3:16, 29). To this promise, Abraham’s faith, and faith like his, is the requisite response. This, briefly, is the gist of the historical perspective initiated in 3:6-9 and resumed at 3:16. This sketch situates the references to faith in 3:23 and 25.”<sup>7</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>E. F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study In Puritan Theology* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1976), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book II, Chapter VII (vol. 1, pp. 348-366).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 360. The third use of the law, which, Calvin says, pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, is often sadly neglected in Evangelical circles.

<sup>4</sup>M. S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom: Relating to God and Others Through the Ten Commandments* (Moody Press, 1993), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: Hermenia A Critical and Historical Commentary* (Fortress 1979), p. 154.

<sup>6</sup>John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Moody, 1987), p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>R. B. Gaffin, *In The Fullness of Time: An Introduction To The Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Crossway, 2022), p. 272.