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MINISTRIES

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Why Then the Law? (Galatians 3:19-29)

An important section in Paul’s letter to the Galatians is found in chapter 3, verses 19-29. In this section of his letter, Paul answers a question concerning the purpose of God’s law, the Torah. What role does the law play in God’s plan of redemption revealed in Messiah?

The section begins with the question, “Why then the law?” Or in other words, “What was the purpose of the law?” The rest of the passage goes on to give Paul’s answer to this question. Let’s look at the first verse in our study:

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.**

This verse is commonly interpreted as saying that the law was temporary. Now that the Messiah has come, the law is no longer binding on Christians. This perspective is argued further on the basis of verses 23-25.

Galatians 3:23-25

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned **until the coming faith would be revealed**. So then, the law was our guardian **until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, **we are no longer under a guardian**.

Here, Paul is essentially saying the same thing he said in verse 19. Instead of saying “until the offspring should come,” he says, “**until the coming faith would be revealed**.” Again, the popular interpretation is that the law was until Christ. Now that Christ has come, the law is no longer relevant.

However, recently scholars have challenged this popular interpretation. One of the biggest reasons for this is that the popular interpretation doesn’t seem to fit with Paul’s broader teaching on the law. As Dr. Craig Keener writes:

Paul's entire theology of the law cannot be properly extrapolated from a single (polemical) passage.

-Craig Keener, *Galatians* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 148

To properly understand Paul's teaching in this passage, we need to view it in light of everything else he says concerning the law, as well as the broader context of Galatians. So, first let's review Paul's broader teaching regarding God's law:

- The law is "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12)
- The law is "spiritual" (Romans 7:14)
- Sin is defined by breaking the commandments of the law (Romans 7:7); believers are not to continue sinning (Romans 6:1-2)
- God never intended the law to be a means of justification/salvation (Galatians 2:21; 3:21)
- The Holy Spirit writes the law on the hearts of believers, empowering them to keep it (Romans 8:2-4)
- Faith in the Messiah does not nullify the law but establishes it (Romans 3:31)
- Paul appeals to the law's authority in support of moral imperatives (1 Corinthians 9:8-9)
- Paul rebukes people based on the law (1 Corinthians 5)
- Paul agrees with the Messiah that one's observance of the law must be fueled by love (Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:8-10)

As we can see, Paul's broader teaching regarding God's law seems to affirm its ongoing value and authority. This should cause us to reevaluate the popular interpretation of this passage in Galatians. How can Paul be saying the law is irrelevant in light of Christ while affirming its ongoing value and authority elsewhere in his letters? Understanding the context of Galatians will help us reconcile this apparent contradiction.

The primary purpose of Paul's letter is to combat certain false teachers who were attempting to influence the believers at the church of Galatia. Many interpreters have argued that these false teachers were imposing law-keeping onto the Gentile believers at Galatia, and that's what Paul opposed.

But a careful reading reveals that Paul's issue wasn't with the law itself. Paul opposed a *misuse* of the law—a distortion of it.

The false teachers taught that the Gentile believers must get circumcised in order to be saved and included among God's people. We see this false doctrine also expressed in Acts 15:

Acts 15:1

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Essentially, the false teachers believed that the only way Gentiles could be "saved" was to "become Jewish" through ritual conversion. As Messianic theologian Tim Hegg explains:

[T]he term "circumcision" is used as a shorthand way of describing proselytism—that rabbinic ceremony by which a Gentile person would be given the status of being a Jew and therefore qualify to have a place in the world to come [m.*Sanhedrin* 10.1]. Given this understanding, one

is in a far better position to understand why Paul speaks so strongly against circumcision (Gal 5:2-3). He is not arguing against the biblical commandments, as is seen by the fact that he has Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1f). In Galatians, Paul is using “circumcision” to mean “to become a proselyte,” that is, to accept the idea that “becoming a Jew” would secure a place in the world to come.

-Tim Hegg, *Why We Keep Torah: Ten Persistent Questions* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2009), p. 129

This controversy sparked what has come to be called the Jerusalem Council, in which the apostles ruled that Gentiles and Jews are “saved” in the same way—by grace through faith in the Messiah (Acts 15:7-11).

This was the same issue that Paul addressed in Galatians. False teachers had infiltrated the church of Galatia and were teaching that one’s salvation and inclusion among God’s people depended on whether or not they had a Jewish status. And the only way for a Gentile to “become Jewish” was to submit to the false teachers’ formula for ritual conversion—a process that involved circumcision, among other things.

Furthermore, in order to maintain one’s status as a member of the covenant community, one must abide by certain “works of the law” as defined by the false teachers. The false teachers essentially taught that one gains their salvation and acceptance from God, not on the basis of faith in Messiah, but on the basis of one’s “Jewish status,” which is defined by men and obtained and maintained by human effort.

This teaching is a complete distortion and abuse of God’s law, which was never intended to justify anyone. It is also completely contrary to the gospel message, which declares that one is saved and accepted by God on the basis of grace through faith in Messiah. It’s the Messiah’s work on the cross, not our own work, which saves us. This “different gospel,” preached by the false teachers, cannot save. This is why Paul writes that those who rely on the works of the law are under a curse:

Galatians 3:10-11

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that **no one is justified before God by the law**, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Again, Paul’s message—the true Gospel message—is that the only way to be justified before God is by faith in Messiah.

Paul goes on to say this:

Galatians 3:12

But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

When Paul says, “the law is not of faith,” he means that relying on one’s “Jewish status” obtained and maintained by one’s own efforts is not done out of genuine faith. This is clear by the context of the passage. Paul says elsewhere that faith establishes the law (Romans 3:31), so he can’t be saying here that the law and faith are incompatible.

Paul’s point is that the false teachers had it backwards. One’s obedience to the law does not generate faith, but rather is an outgrowth of faith. Genuine faith results in *faithfulness* to the law. Paul

demonstrates this biblical pattern by his quote of Leviticus 18:5, “**The one who does them shall live by them.**” In other words, the role of the Torah is not to provide faith but to provide a way of *living out* one’s faith.

As scholar J.K. McKee writes:

Galatians 3:12 should be read as communicating that while the Torah is not of faith, it is yet intended to bring the right way of living to those who keep its commandments.

J.K. McKee, *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* (McKinney, TX: Messianic Apologetics, 2012) pp. 107-108

Over and over, Paul drives home his point that God saves us and accepts us on the basis of faith in Messiah, not our own efforts by the law. It’s Yeshua’s work on the cross, and our faith in *his work*, that affords us our status as God’s people.

Paul continues:

Galatians 3:13-14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

The law of God promised a curse upon those who “chose death” by their rejection of God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 30:19). Since we’ve all sinned—we’ve all broken God’s commandments—we are all cursed. Yeshua’s becoming a curse for us—that is, taking the curse of the law upon himself—resulted in the blessing of Abraham coming to the Gentiles, all the nations. Thus, through our faith in Messiah’s work, we are adopted into Abraham’s family:

Galatians 3:29

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Again, ritual conversion according to man-made formulas will not make someone part of God’s people, Israel. The only way to be adopted into the family of Abraham is by faith in Messiah’s work.

All of this raises the question: if the law does nothing to justify us before God, then what is its purpose? What role does the law play in God’s plan of redemption? That’s the question Paul answers in the second half of this chapter.

Paul begins his answer by stating that later covenants do not change or annul previous covenants. Therefore, the covenant made at Sinai, which includes the law, cannot annul the covenant made with Abraham 430 years earlier (3:15-17). God’s promise to Abraham, based solely on *God’s faithfulness* in accordance with his grace, cannot be altered to become a conditional promise based on law keeping when the Sinai covenant is introduced (3:18). The inheritance is based on God’s promise to Abraham, not based on human effort.

So, again, the question is raised: **Why then the law?**

If the blessing is based on God's promise to Abraham, in accordance with his grace and not earned through human effort, what is the purpose of the law?

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.**

So, according to Paul, the law was “added.” Added to what? It was added to the promise given to Abraham. Why? “Because of transgressions.” Typically this is understood to mean, “to reveal transgressions.” This is usually understood in a negative sense—the law was given to reveal sin and declare people guilty. Others have gone so far as to suggest the law was added *as a punishment*—that is, because we've sinned, we now have rules to follow.

Some scholars, however, have suggested a more positive function of the law being expressed in this verse. Here is the phrase, “because of transgressions,” in Greek:

τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν

According to the Christian New Testament scholar, James Dunn:

In the case of 3.19a the issue centres on the meaning of χάριν [charin]. Here we need to recall that the word is the accusative form of χάρις [charis], ‘grace, favour’, and that its usual meaning as attested elsewhere in usage of the time is ‘for the sake of, on behalf of, on account of.’ This suggests a much more immediately gracious objective for the law than simply ‘to make conscious of transgressions,’ and certainly than ‘to provoke transgressions.’ It suggests, in fact, the purpose of the law as it was generally recognized within the (OT) scriptures and the Judaism of Paul's time: **that is, as a means of dealing with transgressions.** In other words, what was probably in mind here was the whole sacrificial cult at whose centre was the provision of means for covering sin and removing guilt, means of atonement.

-James Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 270

So, according to Dunn, “because of transgressions” is better understood as “for the sake of transgressions.” In other words, the law is given to reveal the “means of dealing with transgressions.”

Tim Hegg echoes this same thought:

The Greek particle χάριν (*charin*) indicates “the goal” to which something points or proceeds. The Torah was given with the goal of revealing God's method of dealing with transgressions.

-Tim Hegg, *Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Tacoma WA: TorahResource, 2010), p. 148

How does the law show the way God would deal with transgressions? As we read earlier from James Dunn, the sacrificial system outlined in the law is likely what Paul is hinting at. The sacrificial system reveals God's method of dealing with transgressions. This part of the law taught that sin is dealt with through repentance and atoning sacrifices. The curse for breaking God's law—death—was transferred to the innocent animal. The animal died in the worshipper's place so that the worshipper could receive forgiveness. This harkens back to a few verses earlier in Galatians where Paul speaks of Christ

redeeming us from the curse of the law “[by becoming a curse for us](#)” (Galatians 3:13).

For more information on this topic, please see our teaching [Animal Sacrifices in Light of Messiah](#).

This understanding makes a lot of sense in light of the second part of the verse: “[until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.](#)”

The law was given to show how God deals with transgressions—that is, through substitutionary atonement—the innocent paying the price for the guilty. This was “until the offspring should come.” As Hegg writes:

The point is that the revelation of the Torah regarding how God provides redemption in the face of transgressions has its focal point in Yeshua. Once Yeshua had come and offered Himself as God’s eternal sacrifice, the ultimate revelation to which the sacrifices pointed had been given. This is Paul’s consistent perspective: the Torah leads to Yeshua [...] The use of “until” in the phrase “until the seed would come” does not mean that once Yeshua has come, the Torah is no longer of any value. What it does mean is that the revelation of God’s redemptive plan, the means of forgiveness given as it was in the Torah, is eclipsed in the brightness of the revelation in His Messiah. Even this does not mean that the revelatory value of the sacrifices has been nullified. But it means that the revelation of God’s salvation finds its greatest expression in Yeshua who is the fulfillment of the Torah’s revelation.

-Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Tacoma WA: TorahResource, 2010), p. 148

So, “[why then the law?](#)” It was given to reveal God’s means of dealing with transgressions, until the offspring—Messiah—who would come. The law was added to the Abrahamic promise as additional revelation ultimately pointing toward the Messiah.

In other words, the promise and the law work together in revealing God’s plan of redemption. They are not incompatible or contradictory. As Paul goes on to say:

Galatians 3:21

[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.](#)

So, again, Paul’s issue is not with the law itself. His issue is with a misuse of the law—that is, the idea that one can earn a righteous standing before God on the basis of his own efforts. Paul continues:

Galatians 3:22

[But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ \[Messiah Yeshua\] might be given to those who believe.](#)

The Scriptures show that everyone has sinned and the only way to receive forgiveness is according to the promise by faith in the Messiah—a gift of God that cannot be earned by human effort.

Now we get to the second set of difficult verses that are often interpreted as saying the law is irrelevant in light of Christ. But since we’ve unpacked the context of this passage, we can hopefully understand more clearly what Paul is saying:

Galatians 3:23-25

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

In God's plan of redemption, the law served to point sinners toward the Messiah. Paul now uses the metaphor of a guardian, or *pedagogue*, to illustrate this point. The power of this metaphor is missed without an understanding of the historical context. As Hegg explains:

In the Roman culture, the *pedagogue* (literally "boy leader") was a hired servant whose duty it was to see that the student was taken to the teacher and brought back home each day, and to superintend the student's conduct. The Pedagogue was not the teacher! He was a servant to make sure the student was taken to the teacher.

-Tim Hegg, *Why We Keep Torah: Ten Persistent Questions* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2009), p. 132

Paul's use of this metaphor is intended to teach us that the law leads us to the teacher—that is, the Messiah. That's one of the functions of the law—to be a pedagogue, to bring us to the Messiah. This metaphor makes perfect sense in light of what we've learned from Galatians 3:19. The law was added to reveal God's means of dealing with transgressions. The law points to the Messiah and justification by faith.

But what do we make of verse 25: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian." Does this mean that the law is useless once a person receives the Messiah by faith? Not at all.

Keep in mind the context. Paul is saying that one of the functions of God's law is to keep charge over us until it leads us to the Messiah in whom we find salvation by faith. Once one has put their faith in the Messiah—once one has been brought to the teacher—the law's role *as a pedagogue* has ended. One who has already come to faith in Christ no longer needs the law to lead them to faith in Christ. But this does not mean that the law ceases to function in other roles, such as defining sin and bringing blessing to those who obey it. Paul is clear elsewhere that the law of God still applies to our lives as believers when it comes to living in accordance with God's will.

Here is how Paul concludes this chapter:

Galatians 3:26-29

For in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua]. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

We are justified and included among God's people by grace through faith in the Messiah. It's through faith, not ritual conversion, that we become included among Abraham's offspring. It is through faith in Messiah's work, not our own work, that we become sons of God.

Paul's issue was not with the law but with a misuse of the law. The false teachers in Galatians were putting the proverbial cart before the horse. They said that one could earn their place in the world to come through human effort in accordance with *their application* of the law. Paul taught that true

obedience to the law is on the basis of faith.

In Galatians, Paul is simply teaching the biblical pattern: Israel was saved by the blood of the Passover lamb. It was after they were delivered out of Egypt that they were given the law to follow, not the other way around. It is the same pattern with Yeshua—we are saved and delivered by grace through faith. Now that we've been freed, we walk as free people in accordance to God's "holy and righteous and good" law.

To conclude, Christian Old Testament scholar, Dr. Daniel Block, provides an excellent summary:

Paul seems to have functioned as a second Moses, not only in providing a profoundly theological interpretation of God's saving actions in Christ, but also in reminding his readers that **salvation comes by grace alone**. In Romans and Galatians his argumentation addresses those who would pervert the "law" (a narrow legalistic interpretation of Hebrew *Torah*) into a *means of* salvation, rather than treating it as a *response to* salvation as Moses perceived it. While on the surface Paul's responses to this heresy often appear to contradict Moses, these statements should be interpreted in context and as rhetorical responses to his opponents. In his own disposition toward the "law" he was in perfect step with Moses: **obedience to the law was not a means for gaining salvation but a willing and grateful response to salvation already received.**

-Daniel Block, *The Gospel According to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), p. 3

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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