

Saved by God's Grace, Not the Law

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[0 : 0 0] Galatians chapter 3. We've been seeing all the way along in this letter that there is no other gospel other than the gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And in this section, Galatians 3 verse 15 to 25, we're going to see that we're saved by God's promise, not by God's law.

So Galatians chapter 3 verse 15 to verse 25. Let's hear God's word together. So, brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The scripture does not say and to seeds, meaning many people, but and to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ. What I mean is this, the law introduced 430 years later does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise. But God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. What then was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party, but God is one.

Is the law therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. I'll leave our reading there. Let's begin with a question. Why do we have laws?

In a family, we don't call them laws, we call them rules. Rules that govern behavior, and words and how we use them, and our diet. And we have those rules because they set, for us and especially for children, boundaries and expectations. But all of us will have come to discover that family rules do not create a motivation to obey. What about law in general, terms? We have rules in a classroom about cheating and plagiarism. We have rules that are applied in a courtroom about fraud and murder. Law exists due to wrongdoing. And again, the law is there in an attempt to curb wrong behavior, to put people off bad behavior. But we discover again that laws do not change change desires. And then we come to think about God's law. What is the purpose of God's law?

And maybe especially for us, since the coming of Jesus, since the age of grace, how do we relate to the law of God? We find ourselves in the middle of this letter that Paul is writing to a church in Galatia, because this church is hearing two different views of the law. And so Paul is writing against false teachers in this letter. And he's saying to them, here is what the law does not do.

[4 : 17] Here is what the law cannot do. So they really need to hear this. And we really need to hear this. How does this section, which can sometimes seem a bit remote perhaps, how does this relate to us today? Well, again, we'll see that it's essential to defending the gospel. It's an essential foundation to this truth that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. But perhaps it's also going to be relevant to us if you're here today and you're thinking, is Christianity one of those religions that's all about rules? Maybe that's your question today. Or perhaps your line of thought, maybe you've been in church for a while, maybe a long time, and your line of reasoning goes, well, I need to prove myself to God before God will accept me. If these are our questions and these are our thoughts, then hopefully what we read today will help us to process God's Word. So there's two things I want to draw our attention to this morning. First of all, God's law does not override God's promise. That's taken from verse 15 to 18. In verse 15,

Paul says he's going to use an example from everyday life. And that example is the example of a last will and testament or a will. And we know this because it's still our practice that you cannot alter, you cannot add to a will once it has come into force. The terms of that will are binding.

And so Paul says, if that's true in human covenants, how much more is it true of God that he must always keep to his covenant commitment? And then in verses 16 to 18, we're brought back once again to Abraham. So let me read from verse 16. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.

The scripture does not say and to seeds, meaning many people, but and to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ. And then he says, what I mean is this? The law introduced 430 years later does not set aside the covenant previously established. It does not do away with the promise. So here he takes us back in our thinking to the Old Testament, to the book of Genesis. And in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 15, God enters into covenant, makes a covenant promise to Abraham. He says, I will make your name great.

I will give you a great land, make you a great nation, and through your offspring, through your seed will come blessing to the nations. And in Genesis 15, God does something remarkable in terms of binding himself to keeping his promise. So in Abraham's day, there was a covenant cutting ceremony. And so two people that were making an agreement, they would take some animals, cut the animals in half, create a pathway, and both parties in that agreement would walk through as if to say, if I break my covenant promise, let what's happened to the animals be done to me. God enters into covenant with Abraham. Abraham has a vision. And what he sees is that as there is this pathway through the sacrifice and slaughtered animals, it is only God who walks through. This is God taking the initiative. This is God saying, if I ever break my promise to save by grace, let it be done to me as has happened to these animals.

[8 : 16] It was confidence for Abraham to keep trusting in God's promise. And Paul points out that this happened, verse 17, 430 years before the law. And he does that to say, the law does not change God's commitment. As the faithful God, he must keep that promise that he made to Abraham, which was absolutely binding. And that's the point of verse 18. If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise. But God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. You can't have it two ways. Either God accepts us by law keeping or by the promise and by grace. And Paul says, God's never changed the way he deals with us. It's always been promise and grace and not law. There's an amazing detail that Paul points to us in verse 16. Who are the promises? Who are God's promises given to?

Well, we see clearly that they're giving to Abraham in the first place, but then we're also told that these promises are given to your seed who is Christ. God gives his promises to Jesus. This promise that began with Abraham is realized in Jesus. The source of our spiritual inheritance, the way for us to have access to all God's promises is through trusting in the Lord Jesus. To get into covenant relationships, with God, Paul is reminding us we need to get into Jesus. We don't need to be trusting in ourselves.

We need to get into Jesus and have faith that all God's promises are fulfilled in him. Paul's point, I think, is really clear. Against some of the thought of his day, and perhaps against the contemporary thought of our day, the newer is not always better. Here what we see is that God's promise 430 years before the law is the better way. In fact, it's the only way to be saved, to be brought into fellowship with God. God's law is not salvation 2.0. It's not that he started dealing with people on the basis of promised grace, and then at some point he decides, no, I need to introduce law in order for people to come to me. The law does not update. The law does not replace.

It's promise, promise, promise all the way through. We've been playing a lot of top trumps. This might be a nostalgia trip for some of us. Top trumps, the card game where you have categories, and each card has different values for different categories, and you play cards against each other, and the highest card always wins. Here is Paul saying to us, promised grace always trumps God's law. Always trust in promise, not in our law keeping. And this is the point that Paul is making to wavering Christians. They'd started with Jesus, but now they're thinking, if I really want to be accepted, if I really want to be saved, I need to keep religious ceremonies, and festivals, and dietary laws. And here is Paul saying God's law was never given as the basis for enjoying God's acceptance. Let's think for a moment about birthday presents. It's been another theme in our household this week. When we give a birthday present to our family members, I hope we give as gift and not as reward. What I mean is that we give graciously. We don't give on the condition that somebody earns that gift. That we don't say to our children, you can have your birthday presents or your Christmas presents if you manage to live well this week. We give gifts. We give gifts out of grace, out of loving kindness. And what Paul is making clear to us is that knowing God's love is about receiving that as a gift of grace, not trying to earn it as reward. And this is very different to the message that we hear from the alternative saviors that we are offered in our society. Those saviors that make demands and suggest that they can reward.

What is it that people look to to save them, to give them a sense of meaning and significance? We can think about money perhaps. Money says, I can give you security and joy, but you must serve me.

[13:19] You must work hard. You must fight hard to be better than others and to get those promotions. You must give up a lot. You must become single-minded and greedy and maybe one day you'll have enough to have true security and joy. Or popularity. Some people live for approval, but that too makes demands. You need to wear this and go there and be seen at this party and make those witty comments. And it's exhausting and there's always new fashion and there's always new places opening up and there's never quite that sense that we can rest in people's approval. When we take it to religion, religion based on works, well, if you perform well enough, if you discipline yourself, if you're really committed, you may find acceptance from God. You can never know because what if you start failing and falling?

So here's where Christianity is unique. Because Christianity is an invitation to rest. To rest in what Jesus has done for us. To rest in his finished work. To rest in that grace. To trust in Jesus, not to trust in ourselves. So Paul says to us, God's law does not bring God's blessing. Jesus does.

Now the second half of what we read, I think what Paul is saying to us there is that God's law does not give life. Jesus does. Now we need to remember here that Paul is still focusing on this big question. How is a person justified? How can I be made acceptable? How can I be declared accepted in God's sight? So there was one group that were saying, well, you need Jesus and you need all these laws and ceremonies. And Paul is saying, you need to trust by faith in Jesus and Jesus alone. And so he's responding negatively again to the law, saying here is what the law does not do and cannot do.

We just need to bear in mind that there are other times where Paul has a positive picture of the law. The law reflects the character of God and the values of God. So it is right and good. And as we are in the family of God, it then gives us our ways to live. But here he's saying, here is what the law cannot and does not do. And he does that by asking two key questions. First of all, in verse 19, there's the question, what was the purpose of the law? What is the law for? And then in verse 21, is the law opposed to the promises of God. And the big idea here is that actually the law, we're going to see the law serves the promise. The law serves the gospel by making it sound like the life transforming good news that it is. That the function of the law is to show us our need of a savior. It points out our sin that we might run to Jesus to be saved. So to take that first question, what is the law for?

In verse 19, it was added because of transgressions until the seed to whom the promise referred had come. So the law exposes our sin and prepares the way for Jesus Christ. Now this is key to the gospel. We talk about the gospel as good news, that Jesus is good news. But first we need to recognize there is also bad news when it comes to ourselves, that without Jesus, the Bible is clear that we are spiritually lost, indeed spiritually dead. Paul will use the language of being a slave to sin. We are unable to break free to know God. We are unable to save ourselves. We are unable without Jesus to please God. We are unable to enjoy eternal life with God by ourselves if we are not trusting in Jesus. And so that is part of the gospel that God's law actually makes really clear to us. Because as we read God's law honestly, it begins to show us our guilt. It begins to condemn us and it encourages us to run to Jesus for forgiveness and mercy.

[17 : 59] To use the language here in verse 19, the law shows up our transgressions. The law shows when we go out of bounds, when we trespass into forbidden territory with regards to God's law. So we think we're doing okay. Paul says this in Romans 7, you know, I thought I was doing well and then I remembered what the law said about coveting and all of a sudden I felt really convicted that I was somebody who coveted.

We can feel that we're doing okay until we're exposed to God's perfect law that says don't be angry and don't tell lies and don't be jealous and all those things. Because our tendency naturally as people, I think, is to justify our behavior. We start that as children. We don't necessarily grow out of it very quickly. Well, I did it because they did it to me first. Or, you know, I was provoked or, you know, I was just having one of those days. Or that's just the way it is. There's nothing I can do. But we tend to justify or minimize our wrongdoing. We like to compare with others and say, well, I'm not as bad as that person over there, rather than comparing with God's perfect standard. And so one of the things the law does is it seeks to explode in us that self-deception that is in our hearts.

I think one of the most powerful books I've read in recent years was written by Jerry Bridges called respectable sins. And he was addressing those sins that in, I guess, in Western society have become completely acceptable. Even in churches among Christians, things that we don't necessarily see as being a big deal. Things like gossip and greed, jealousy, pride, a lack of thankfulness. All of those being addressed so as to drive us to see the beauty of God's grace in sending Jesus to be Savior. We need the law for that purpose.

There's an interesting, a difficult in some ways section, the end of verse 19 and into verse 20, says the law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party, but God is one. It seems to be here that Paul is saying that the promise is superior to the law is superior to the law because when God revealed it to Abraham, he spoke directly, firsthand. Whereas when God gave the law to Israel, Paul is saying it came through the angels, it came to Moses, and then it came to the people. So it's another way of saying the promise is superior to the law. But the key point in that paragraph is that the law exposes our law-breaking. Or as John Stott puts it, the law lifts the lid on our human respectability. So in that way, the law supports the promise because the law is constantly saying to us, don't look to me. I can't save you. Look to

God's grace in Jesus for your hope, for your security, and for your salvation. And then we get to that second question. Is the law opposed to the promises of God? Is the law opposed to the grace of God?

[21 : 25] How does he answer in verse 21? Absolutely not. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. In other words, the law is not opposed to the promise because the law was never a pathway to life with God. The function of the law was always to point us to salvation in Jesus. I think that's something where maybe if we've been in churches for a while, we perhaps need to pause and reflect. How do we think about the Old Testament? How do we think Old Testament Israel became the people of God? Because sometimes I think we can find it really hard to figure how does grace and law work in the Old Testament? That was certainly true of the religious leaders in Jesus' day. They were persuaded that they would be the people of God if they kept God's law rigidly. Were Israel God's people because they kept the law? You just need to think about the book of Exodus, and the answer is no. Think about that song that Moses sang and the people sang in Exodus 15, celebrating the fact that Israel was saved by God's grace alone. They became the people of God at God's initiative and by God's grace and mercy. So God, again, never changes his approach.

In the Old Testament and the New Testament, there's only one way to be saved. It's the way of grace and trusting in God's promised salvation. For them, they trusted that these sacrifices that they offered were pointing to something greater. We know that was pointing to Jesus. For us, we're trusting in Jesus as our sacrifice. There's huge logic in verse 21 as Paul drives home the reality that if there was any other way of salvation, the cross of Jesus does not make sense. God's eternal plan to lovingly send his son on a rescue mission. The sacrificial love of Jesus. The sacrificial love of Jesus really makes no sense if by law keeping, I can make myself acceptable to God. So Paul, again, is saying to us, the law does not give life.

Only faith in Jesus does. And to help get that into our minds, he uses two pictures to highlight this point for us. So in verse 22 and verse 23, we see that the law of God is like a prison.

The scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Now, here's a surprising description of the Old Testament scripture. What Paul is saying is that as we read, as we read about God's holiness and God's perfect standard, we see that we are unable by ourselves to keep that law. That we are therefore prisoners to sin, unable, even if we wanted to, to live perfectly. So we are unable to be acceptable in God's eyes by ourselves. So scripture imprisons us. The law and the commands function like armed guards that surround us. It's like we're held prisoner. We know there's freedom over there, but we just can't break through.

[25 : 07] The door's locked and the guards are in place. Why? Because the law would say to us, do this, do this, do this. You can know God's blessing if you can keep God's law perfectly from birth to death 100% of the time. And we know that we can't do that. So the law is a dead end.

It's like running up against a brick wall. And so here's the irony of Paul's day. You've got false teachers and they're saying, come and join us. Come and keep the law in order to be truly free.

But they're speaking from inside a spiritual prison. And they're calling people who are free to give up freedom to return to slavery if they wander away from trusting in Jesus alone. Where does freedom come from? What is the key that unlocks the door of the prison so that we can know God? What does it say in verse 22? It's through faith in Jesus Christ for those who believe. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith in his finished work on our behalf. Faith that he is the perfect sacrifice given for us. Trusting in, depending on him alone, submitting to him as Lord and Savior. That's the only pathway to freedom, not the law. And then there's a second picture showing that the law is not the way to life, but Jesus is. In verses 24 and 25, there's the idea of the law as a demanding tutor or supervisor.

Some students will be groaning at this point. Verse 24, so the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. So here's the picture from Paul's day. If you were a wealthy family and you had children that you wanted to be brought up to follow the ways of the family, you would often use an older servant.

[27 : 33] And that older servant's job was essentially to beat family values into a person until they came to maturity. Their job was not to love. Their job was to ensure discipline and expose failures.

Paul is saying the law functions like that in our lives. It rebukes us. It exposes the sin in our hearts and our lives. And it instills in us a need for Jesus in order to be justified by faith.

So again, the law is not opposed to grace and promise because the law was never set up as an alternative way to be saved. Rather, the law works alongside the promise, pointing people to trust to what God has promised, to trust in grace that comes to us in Jesus. That the law shows us we need our faith to rest in Him. So as we conclude, what is the relation of the promise to the law? Well, Paul has shown us that we need the law to show that we need the promise of Jesus. I like the way John Stott puts it.

He says, only against the dark background of sin and judgment does the gospel shine forth. The law shows us the darkness in our heart. Without that, we think we're basically okay and God should be glad to have us.

But when we see the darkness in our hearts and our lives, then the beauty, the perfection of Jesus, the salvation that He offers, strikes us, shines on us as truly good news.

[29 : 26] And again, Paul is writing to these Christians who are beginning to move away from that. And he's concerned for them. Because to get that wrong is to undermine the death of Jesus as the only way to be saved.

It's to say, well, the cross is fine, but I need something else on top of that. And if we begin to do that, then we'll begin to lose security and joy.

If we think that it's up to us to add to the finished work of Jesus by keeping the law. When we think about how non-gospel religion works, there is always, maybe some of us have had this experience, there's always a sense of slavery.

You must do, do, do in order to live, is how that logic works. In that kind of system, God always comes to us in a remote and impersonal way.

Perhaps we think of God as a judge, but we would never dream to call on Him as a loving Father. And when our religion is based on works and not the finished work of Jesus, there'll always be anxiety about our standing.

[30 : 46] Have I done enough? This day, this week, this month, this year. And so Paul points out to us that the law leads us to Christ as the fulfillment of God's promise and the only way to life with God.

That He's the only one who's obeyed perfectly for us, and He died to take the curse for a broken law. So once again, we're being reminded by Paul that we're saved by grace alone.

And so once again, we have this invitation to trust in Jesus Christ alone.