

Galatians: Free in Christ

Christ and the Law

Galatians 3:19-25

If God promised to Abraham to save and bless and fill the world with his descendants 430 years earlier, why did He give Moses the law (v19)? If salvation isn't through the law, what good is it? Paul gladly answers the question because God is a Father who loves to show us His ways, not a drills sergeant who loves to tell us what to do. Paul takes us up to see the panoramic view of the Old Covenant leading up to Jesus like foothills before a great mountain. This passage is central for understanding the Old Testament and how it led to Christ.

Because of Transgressions

We know that the generation of Moses was not the first batch of sinners. Why give the law to them? Paul has established that salvation was given to Abraham and his seed by promise, and that seed is Christ (3:16). Before the seed came, God wanted the world to get ready, and law was part of that. Calvin described the three uses of the law: to act as a mirror, convicting us of sin (Ps. 19:7; Rom. 3:20); to restrain evil men (1 Tim. 1:9-11); and to teach us how to love God and men (Jn.14:15; Rom. 13:8-10). There are parallels here to the systematic first use of the law, but Paul is not talking about individuals, but the world. This is a temporal, national and cosmic use of the law. The law was added *until* the seed arrived (v19). The Torah had a purpose and a shelf life. Israel was sinful before receiving the Ten Commandments, but needed to understand particular sins and their depth of sin in order to look rightly to the messiah. God gave 613 commandments in the Torah to show Israel their heart, "for by the law is knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The more Israel heard and the more she lived, the plainer her sin would become along with the impossibility of a merely human way out. The law is righteous and wonderful, but also despairing for the sinner. Parents apply the law of God well when teaching clear and just rules, not judging motives, and leading children to repentance and trust in the Savior. In this sense rules really are made to be broken. The flesh wants to break rules just because they exist (Rom. 5:20, 7:7-12).

The Mediated Law and Unmediated Promise

The law reveals God's character, but it was delivered through a mediator (vv19-20). Many are puzzled by this point, but it shows us the nearness of God's promise. The law was given to angels and then to Moses (Heb. 2:2; Acts 7:38). There was a mediator between God and His people in the giving of the law. But with Abraham, the one God simply gave the promise. In other words, the promise is closer to and came more intimately from God. The promise was earlier but also nearer to God. We could say God gave the law because of who Israel was, but He gave the promise because of who He is. It did not need to be mediated.

NOTES:

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Preparation for the Promise

Does this mean the law is against the promise? Absolutely not (v21). How could the map be against the destination? If a law could have been a vehicle for righteousness, it would have been, but it couldn't because we would never follow it (Rom. 8:3-4). Instead, the law condemned God's people under sin so they would trust Him to provide salvation in Jesus Christ (v22). When Paul says "before faith came" (v23), he not changing the subject to a personal testimony. He's contrasting the time of Moses and the time of Christ (cf. Jn. 1:17). He says "we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith that would afterward be revealed" (v23). To be *under guard* is to be confined without choice the way he was in Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32), and *kept* is how a fish was contained in a net (Lk. 5:6). Lest we think the law is a gladiator, he says it was the confinement provided by a tutor or pedagogue, the kind who takes you to Jesus (v24). This tutor was someone hired by parents to discipline and take a boy where he needed to go. Paul tells the Corinthians they have ten thousand *tutors* in Christ, but only one father (1 Cor. 4:15). The law convicted and disciplined Israel all so she would be ready to meet, trust and follow Jesus, the seed who was promised and in whom all the promises are fulfilled. It's not that we don't have the law, but it isn't our tutor anymore (v25). We are under the law of *Christ* (1 Cor. 9:21), and all the laws that applied when we were immature have been fulfilled and transformed. The church has grown up, moved out the house and is free to live wisely by the Spirit. The law was a tutor for an immature, but it's a sign that we haven't grown up if we despise it or the time when it was necessary. The law showed and shows us what it cost to redeem us, the great redemption we have in Christ.