

Galatians 3:15-22 "The Law's Role"

As we come to our text this morning we continue to see Paul make his case to the Galatian Christians, in particular those Judaizers in Galatia who were disturbing the church with their teaching that the law must be added as an integral part of their salvation.

And what we've seen so far is how the law is not a system of justification which is based on faith, but rather a system which was designed to work along side faith in Israel; faith being the only way anyone can be justified before God.

This is the point Paul makes in verse 11.

GAL 3:11-12 "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith;..."

Now, to the degree that Jesus Christ kept the law perfectly, and then suffered the curse of sin on our behalf, do we see the law play its most important role in our lives. And so, it was Christ's perfect obedience to the law, not ours, which secures our salvation as He died in our place, having been legally declared guilty as he hung on a cross.

GAL 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 hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."

But Paul doesn't seem to be satisfied with just stating the facts of how the Redeemer was chosen to become our curse. He goes on to describe this legal arrangement made in the counsels of heaven by bringing in an example of how this worked in everyday life.

GAL 3:15-17 "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.”

GAL 3:15 “Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations; even though it is only a man’s covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it.” (NASB)

Paul’s point in using this illustration is to show the permanence of a legal arrangement in everyday life, and he makes the connection to how God’s legal arrangement with men is similar.

And by the way, the word used in both the NIV and the NASB for this legal arrangement is covenant. And yet, the Greek word could be better translated a testament or will. This would be the legal arrangement whereby an individual makes a last will and testament spelling out what he wanted to do with his estate and how that would be divided up among his family.

In this kind of legal arrangement no changes could be made to the document after the death of the person. And so, the last will and testament stands firm. Now, what does this have to do with the Mosaic law, since this is the point Paul is making as he shows how the faith of Abraham is what made him righteous?

Well, God entered into a legal arrangement with Abraham. He made certain promises to Abraham. And then the Lord sealed this arrangement with a blood sacrifice whereby animals were killed as they stood in the place of men.

GEN 15:8-18 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land,..."

Just as a last will and testament is binding after the death of the person, this covenant that God made with Abraham was binding as the Lord used the death of these animals to prove His resolve in fulfilling His promises to Abraham.

The point is that nothing which came after this legal arrangement with Abraham would change the original covenant that God made

with him. Both the Gentile Christians in Galatia along with the Judaizers would have understood this illustration. They would have concluded that the blessing which was given to Abraham by God was received by Abraham by faith as he believed in the promises of God.

Therefore, when the law came many years later it would play no role at all in changing the original arrangement God made with Abraham, since just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.

In other words, if Abraham was justified by faith in the promises of God, you cannot come after the fact and change the covenant by adding anything to it, especially the law since the first “covenant [was] permanent and unchangeable.” (John MacArthur)

But this is exactly what the Judaizers were attempting to do when they compelled the Galatians to become circumcised to complete their salvation in Christ. Paul says, you can’t do that since the first covenant was complete and unchangeable. You can’t change the rules mid-stream.

Now, as to the promises given to Abraham the Judaizers would argue that they were only given to Israel since they were the seed or descendants of Abraham. Therefore, since Abraham was later instructed by God to be circumcised, along with his family, the Judaizers’ reasoning was that to be a true Christian who has accepted the Messiah who came through the Jews, everyone must be circumcised to lock in their salvation.

But Paul says, “no, the promises given to Abraham were spiritual in nature and included, not just the Jews, but all mankind as they were to be received by faith; the same faith Abraham employed in God.”

GAL 3:16 “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.”

Why does Paul qualify the word seed here? Well, one reason is that the word seed in the Greek can be used the same way we would use it in English. If you go to the store to buy seed for your garden, you’re not talking about one individual seed, but a packet of seed which contains many seeds.

However, if you were going to the store to buy seed and you only had one seed in mind you would make that distinction. And that's what Paul is doing here. When he says that the promise was given to Abraham and his seed, he is making that distinction of a special kind of seed; a seed or descendant who would be found in one person.

And this is the beauty of that legal arrangement which was made with Abraham. The promise was fulfilled in a person, not in a set of rules. The promise was secured in a person, not by keeping the law.

And, in essence, Abraham is given the same promise that was given to Adam and Eve, as we've said earlier, who also received the promises by faith. Remember the promise?

It was actually a statement God made to Satan in the Garden of Eden after Adam rebelled against God by believing Satan's lie.

GEN 3:15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The word offspring in Gen. 3:15 is the Hebrew word *zera`*, and it's the exact same word used by God to tell Abraham that the promise was given to his seed, his offspring. Both the seed in Gen. 3:15 and the seed in Gen. 15:6, in reference to the seed of Abraham, is describing not many seeds, or many descendants, but one seed, Jesus Christ Himself.

And by the way, this shows us clearly that from beginning to end the word of God is about the Messiah Jesus. If in studying the bible we don't see Jesus, then we've missed a very important aspect of the word of God, because it all points to Christ.

This is what Jesus was trying to show the disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection as they explained how their Master had been crucified.

LUK 24:24-27 "Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

This is why we study the Scriptures; to see Jesus and learn to follow Him by faith. Let's continue.

Verse 16 ... "The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ."

Now, if the promise to Abraham was meant to be enjoyed by the seed of Abraham, and if the seed was not many but one, how in the world does that apply to you and me, if the seed is Jesus Christ?

Very easily. The seed of Abraham, who is Christ, includes everyone who is in Christ by faith. Therefore, if you are ever to enjoy the promises given to Abraham and his seed you must place your faith in that seed, or that promised one, who was promised to Abraham.

This is why we who are in Christ are referred to as being one in the Spirit of Christ; part of one body, who is Christ; and of one faith, which is placed in Christ. You and I are of that seed of Abraham because we have placed our faith in the seed promised to Abraham, just as Abraham did. And this is why Abraham is referred to as our spiritual father.

This is also why the Jews of Christ's day were warned not to think that simply being a physical descendant of Abraham gave them an assurance of the hope Abraham had. John the Baptist made this abundantly clear.

MAT 3:7-8 "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."

Okay, back to our text.

GAL 3:17-18 "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."

Again, keep the context in mind. Paul is using a human legal arrangement, (in this case a last will and testament), as an example of how those arrangements are not changed once they've been ratified or established.

If, for example, you wrote up a will 10 years ago, and you die tomorrow, nothing that comes after your death will change what you have established in that will. The courts will honor that legal arrangement. And so, whether it's 10 years or 400 years nothing can change it.

GAL 3:17 "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."

The covenant stands. If the law had been given the next day, after God made the promise to Abraham, it wouldn't have changed the arrangement God made with him, because God made a promise and He would stick to it.

And so, if it wouldn't change the promise if the law were given the next day, it certainly wouldn't change the promise if the law is introduced 430 years later. It doesn't set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.

At this point the Judaizers have got to be wringing their hands because they know how covenants and legal arrangements work. They've been caught stretching the truth to suit their own selfish desires to make the Gentiles like them.

Paul has proved, according to the Scriptures of the O.T., how God's covenant with Abraham was meant to be accepted and it had nothing to do with keeping the law, but everything to do with grace and faith.

GAL 3:18 "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."

Notice again, that Paul speaks of an inheritance and it is implied that the inheritance is the eternal promise of entering into God's rest which is found only in Christ.

But Paul is making a distinction here for the sake of the promise which was made to all nations, not just Israel. And that promise has to do with eternal life found only in Christ by faith.

All right. So, we understand that Abraham's faith in the promises of God is what made him righteous before God. The law which was added hundreds of years later cannot annul or change that original promise and plays no part in that promise.

So, what do we do with the law? What part does the law play in the life of a Jew, or anyone for that matter? Well, Paul answers that by asking the question.

GAL 3:19 "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."

Here is the answer as to why the law was added. This is not the only reason, but a very important one. "It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come."

What does this mean? Well, Paul is agreeing with the Judaizers that the law did play a very important role in Israel. But it didn't play the role they thought. The word says it was added because of transgression.

What this means is that the law was added to show what a transgression was according to God's perfect standard. And the advantage the Jew had was that the very Creator of the world personally gave them His standard. He didn't give it to any other nation.

PSA 147:19 "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. 20 He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD."

David, along with every other Jew, knew that they had been given special privileges, not the least of which was to receive the very word of God. But again, that word of God, which includes the law, was always meant to point to Christ.

JOH 5:45-46 "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"

This by the way, was also one of the purposes of the law as Paul points out later in this letter.

GAL 3:24 “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

But the reason it was designed to lead us to Christ is because of the way the law works in our lives in pointing out transgression or sin. In other words, if we don't have a law spelling out how sinful sin is we are less likely to consider it so bad.

But it was because of the law that we know how bad sin is and how it offends a holy God.

ROM 3:19 -20 “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

ROM 7:7-9 “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.”

That's what Paul means in our text when he says the law was added because of transgressions. It was God's gracious way of saying to men, here is what sin is and here is what sin produces; death. And the reason is because you can never rise above the perfect standard I have set which is essential for a relationship with Me since no sin can dwell in My presence.

And this is where the promise of life from God, which was given to Abraham, is infinitely greater than the law.

ROM 5:20-22 “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

And, as Paul says in verse 19 of our text, it is Jesus Christ our Lord who is the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The promise, not the law, is where the Galatian Christians are being pointed. And in so doing the Judaizers are put on notice.

But does this mean that the law is sinful, or that the law is evil? Not at all. As Paul has pointed out it was given by God for a purpose and he explains part of what that purpose is in the rest of our text.

Vs.19-22 “..... 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.”

Here Paul explains how and why the Lord instituted the law in Israel. Notice he begins by saying that the law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. Interestingly enough the O.T. Scriptures do not give us any details of angels playing a part in the giving of the law. And yet, in the N.T., just before Stephen was stoned to death for bearing witness to Christ before the Sanhedrin, he points this out.

ACT 7:52-53 “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

The writer of Hebrews also mentions the involvement of angels in connection with the law.

HEB 2:2-3 “For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.”

The N.T., which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, acknowledges that angels did play a role in delivering the law to Moses. And of course we know that angels have always played such a role in delivering messages from God to men as they will also do in the last days before Christ returns.

But the point Paul is making is that a mediator was also involved in the giving of the law and in this case it would have been Moses who was acting as Mediator between God and Israel.

But what does Paul mean by the phrase in verse 20? “A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

John MacArthur points out “that a mediator is needed only when more than one party is involved. [In the case of Moses and Israel, obviously two parties were involved; God and Israel with Moses being the mediator]. But God gave the covenant directly to Abraham without a mediator because He was the only one involved in making the covenant.

Abraham was a witness to the covenant and was a beneficiary, but he was not a party to it. Abraham had no part in establishing or keeping the covenant. That responsibility was God’s alone.”

So, again the question needs to be raised so as not to give the Judaizers the impression that Paul was somehow declaring to the law to be evil.

GAL 3:21 “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.”

Here Paul makes it clear that the law plays a vital role in showing who God is and the need for mankind to seek the Savior. The law is not opposed to the promises of God for a couple of reasons. The first one is that the law actually drives men to Christ because it not only shows them to be sinful but it also shows them they are guilty before God and must come to Him for the solution to their sin problem which separates them from God.

In that sense the law plays a very important role. But as he says here in our text the law is not opposed to the promises of God because we’re talking apples and oranges. The law was designed to do one thing while the promises were designed for something else. The law pointed out transgressions, the promises delivered us from the penalty of those transgressions.

That’s why he says in verse 21, “For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.”

In other words, if the law could impart life, there would be no need for any additional solution to our sin problem. But the very fact

that Christ needed to come to redeem us shows us that the law was never designed to impart righteousness. And so, the law is not opposed to the promises of God, because they are fulfilled in Christ.

GAL 3:22 “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.”

The whole world is a prisoner of sin, whether Jew or Gentile, because we are guilty of transgressing the law of God. And because the law’s function is to put us under this guilt it can’t help in reestablishing a right relationship with God. But the “promised one” can.

The “promised one” promised to Abraham who received this promise by faith. This was his righteousness put to his account. And it is this righteousness we receive by faith in Christ alone.

The law is not our Savior; Jesus Christ is. But what we find is that in Christ we have a new law put in our hearts, the law of love. If there is any commandment we should keep it should be the one placed there by Christ which He speaks of in Matthew, which is the sum of the whole law.

MAT 22:36-40 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."