**The Letter to the Galatians**

**A Call for Freedom from Legalism - #5**

**Why the Law? Why Faith?**

**Galatians 3:19-25**

***Galatians 3:19*** *“Why, then, the law?” It was added because of transgressions until the Seed for whom the promise was intended should come. And it was ordained through angels by means of a mediator.* ***20*** *A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one!* ***21*** *Is the law, then, opposed to the promises of God? By no means! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would certainly have been on the basis of law,* ***22*** *But the Scripture confined everyone without distinction under sin, so that the promise that is based on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* ***23*** *Before this faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being confined until this coming faith should be revealed.* ***24*** *The law, therefore, was our supervisory guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.* ***25*** *But now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a supervisory guardian.*

**Notes on the text**

We can divide this section of scripture into three parts:

1. A major question is asked regarding the reason and function of the Mosaic law.

*Why then the law? – verse 19*

2. A supplementary question regarding the relation of the law to the promises of God

*Is the law, then, opposed to the promises of God? – verse 21*

3. A final conclusion that speaks directly to the issue being debated within the churches.

The two questions are similar in form: “Why, then, the law?” and “Is the law, then, opposed to the promises of God?”

Both questions arise from Paul’s attempt to put down legalism in Galatians 3:18:  *If the inheritance is by legal right, then it is not by promise; but it was by promise that God bestowed it as a free gift on Abraham.*

More importantly, both questions cry out for an answer if the Judaizers’ call for a nomistic lifestyle (life under the ***nomos***; that is, the law) is to be dealt with effectively.

Each of the two questions is introduced rather abruptly which is the Semitic style where problems are not treated systematically. But Paul as a Jew wanted to reach the final statement which is his declaration of the Gospel. The main expression here is that Christian life is not “under the law.” The thrust of his argument is what it meant to live “under the law,” and he expresses this in his teaching without any hesitation. Here Paul lays out a Christian understanding of the reason and function of the Mosaic law vis-a-vis the Judaizers’ nomistic (law based) message. The two messages have no common ground. Here we have to say that the absences of a common ground should reduce what we call tolerance to point zero.

As for the question in verse 19, “Why, then, the law?” Paul frequently uses “why” (cf. Rom 5:11; also Rom 3:7; Rom 14:10; 1 Cor 4:7) and this interrogative way usually is translated “what is?” or “what signifies?” (cf. Rom 3:1, 9; 4:1; 6:1).

Paul starts his with a question, and the common saying in the Talmud is, “A question has the power of speculation more than the answer.” This is linked to our desire to explore. “No one can live by one answer to a pressing question.” (Sarah Mezrahy). The moment we ask a question, is the moment when changes are required.

If the Mosaic law appeared “430 years” after the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:17); then it follows that the law whose curse “Christ redeemed us from” (Gal 3:13); was the law which was the focus of the Judaizers’ message (1.6ff.), “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed for whom the promise was intended should come. And it was ordained through angels by means of a mediator.”

The reason for the law becomes clear. It was added not for love, freedom and grace but for transgression.

**Five Emphases of ‘Why the law?’**

Paul’s answer to the question “Why the law?” is expressed in terms of five emphases:

1. “It was added”

2. “Because of transgressions”

3. “Until the Seed to whom the promise was given should come”

4. “It was ordained through angels”

5. “By the hand of a mediator.”

These five clauses must be treated separately, as each one of them points to the basic disagreement with the Judaizers.

**1. ‘It was added’**

“It was added” introduces an important temporal point: the Mosaic Law was brought into effect by God subsequent to his covenant of promise. The fact that it was “added” suggests that the law was not part of God’s redemptive plan. The law is supplementary and hence subordinate to the covenant.

**2. ‘Because of transgressions’**

Paul’s answer “because of transgressions” may be understood as either cognitive in function (i.e., “to bring about a knowledge of” or “point out” transgressions) or causative in function (i.e., “to cause” or “increase” transgressions). The noun has the sense of

“deviation” from a standard or norm,” or of “neglecting an obligation.” Thus the phrase “because of transgressions” may mean either that the law was given to bring about knowledge of sin (cf. Rom 3:20) by identifying it as transgression before God (cf. Rom 4:15; 5:13; 7:7), or that the law was given to increase and multiply sin (cf. Rom 5:20). Both meanings points to the function of the law.

“What is forbidden is more attractive.” This may be seen also in the story of the Fall in the story of creation in Gen 3. The law protects life but our problem with the law is our lack of experience with the distractive side of evil.

**Abba Philemon**

George: Why is sin attractive?

Philemon: I think because God gave us the gift to explore things but we use this gift for our ruin.

George: What is the best way of using this gift for our advantage?

Philemon: If I tell you humility, you may say that I used this word as an answer to escape from facing a hard question.

George: No, tell me how humility re-directs our desire to explore?

Philemon: Two things are inter-twined, submission and humility; and both must function together. If you and I submit to God the Father as Jesus did, we discover that humility has at its heart a trust that the commandments of God are all for our welfare.

George: Last time we met you told me that we have a hidden desire for self-immortality. Is this too related to our desire to explore things, seeking what we may imagine to be enduring?

Philemon: No doubt.

George: What is the link between self- immortality and exploring things?

Philemon: The Bible says that “there many things we consider them sweet but their end is bitterness.” This is where we think that we know good and evil according to our law, not to the law of God which is the true one.

**Conscious of sin**

What does it mean that the law was given to bring about “a consciousness” of sin in sin-hardened humanity? For although “because of transgressions” can be understood in a causal fashion, “to bring about or multiply sin” makes little sense of the following temporal clause, “until the Seed to whom the promise was given should come.” For why should God want an increase of sin building up to the coming of Christ? Furthermore, “to bring about a knowledge of sin” fits the contextual imagery of a supervisory custodian (Gal 3:24-25 and 4:2) and provides an answer to why being us (“under law”) results in being (“under a curse”) in Paul’s earlier words Gal 3:10.

Paul is saying here is that the Mosaic law’s God-given purpose had to do with “transgressions” and not with making anyone righteous (as in legalism) or with making anyone perfect as the Judaizers wanted. Then “because of transgressions” is to be understood broadly to include all the rituals related to food, drinks, and the rest.

**3. ‘Until the Seed to whom the promise was given should come’**

The third point made in Paul’s answer lays stress again on a temporal factor: “until the Seed for whom the promise was intended should come.” Without a doubt, “Seed” is to be given the same sense that Paul insisted it be given in Galatians 3:16 of Christ, though here Paul uses the term as a title (and so it is capitalized the translation). The whole clause beginning with the temporal conjunction “until” sets the duration or the period for the law. Thus the Mosaic law, for Paul, was intended by God to be in effect for God’s people only up until the coming of Christ. Thus the covenant of promise is presented to the mind as of permanent validity, both beginning before and continuing through the period of the law and afterwards. The law on the other hand is temporary, added to the permanent covenant for a period limited in both directions.

*The promise has its future fulfilment but the Law remains as it was before and ever, engraved on stones with no fulfilment.*

Paul certainly does not agree with the dominant teaching of Judaism, which can be read in Psalm 119 or the book of Wisdom 18:4 (LXX), which says “imperishable light of the law.” Josephus states that if not their wealth and their cities, at least the law given the Jews remains immortal (*Against Apion*, 2:277); and Philo states the changelessness of the law for as long as sun, moon, heavens, and the earth continue to exist (*The life of Moses* 2:14). The apocalyptic Jewish writings also emphasize the eternal and immutable character of the law (the book of Jubilee 1.27; 3.31; 6.17). It would, in fact, be difficult to find any Jew who thought otherwise. Certainly the Judaizers of Galatia argued along these lines.

For Paul the advent of the Seed, and that is Christ, put an end to the function of the Law as at least organizing the divine-human relationship.

**4. ‘It was ordained through angels’**

As for this fourth emphasis that the law was “ordained through angels,” the Hebrew text of the OT has no explicit reference to angels being present in the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Exodus 19:18 portrays God as descending on Mount Sinai “in fire” accompanied by smoke and the quaking of the mountain. Deuteronomy 33:2, however, says that the Lord descended Sinai “from myriads of holiness” (or “with myriads of holy ones”) and “with a fiery law.” Psalm 68:18 (LXX 67:18) refers poetically to an accompanying retinue of chariots in the giving of the law, but not directly angels. The first explicit association of angels with the giving of the law came about, it seems, with the LXX’s translation of the textually ambiguous phrase in Hebrew, “with a fiery law,” in Deuteronomy 33:2 (*“angels from his right hand were with him”*). In later rabbinic thought Psalm 68:18 (LXX 67:18) was even more important than Deuteronomy 33:2 for the association of angels with the giving of the law, for the chariotry of God mentioned there was regularly understood as a reference to a large number of angels accompanying God at Sinai giving of the Mosaic law that seems to have been the dominant tradition in Paul’s day, as in the book of Jubilee 1:27-29; Acts 7:38, 53; Heb 2:2; and Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquates,* 15.136. But we must remember that Judaism like all religions does not have one voice. W. D. Davies in an article (Harvard Theological Review 1947, 135-40) says that the angels are the prophets or priests (see, and also F. R. Walton, Harvard Theological Review, 1955 255-57).

The mediation of the angels in the giving of the law seems to have been part of the widespread attempt in early Judaism to assign a role for angels in redemptive events mentioned in the OT. But Rabbinic Judaism, however, there was a rather strong reaction to seeing angels intervening at the critical moments in Israel’s history, with many rabbis arguing that it was God alone who acted for the nation at these times (cf. L. Finkelstein, *“The Oldest Midrash: Pre-Rabbinic Ideals and Teaching in the Passover Haggadah,”* Harvard Theological Review 1938, 290-92). After the close of the NT period efforts were made within certain circles of Rabbinic Judaism to belittle the role of angels at Sinai in order to counter the Christian claim that the law was an inferior revelation because of its mediation by angels (cf. W. D. Davies, Harvard Theological Review 1945, 140n. 17).

H.J. Schoeps in a major study on Paul points out, “The presence of angels at the event of the giving of the law was a favourite bit of embroidery in Rabbinic tradition, and was meant to enhance the glory of Sinai” (Paul, 182). Yet from the context of what was said earlier in verse 19a and what follows in vv 19b-20, it is almost impossible to read “ordained through angels” in any other way than with the intent “to depreciate the law as not given directly by God.” It was probably the case that the Judaizers were citing the angels’ presence at Sinai as evidence of the law’s glory and God’s approval. Paul, however, turns this tradition in *ad hominem* fashion against them.

**5. ‘By the hand of a mediator.’**

The fifth and final feature of Paul’s answer to the question “Why, then, the law?” is the phrase literally: “in the hand of a mediator.” It is a Hebraism that means simply “by means of (cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 184; note also Acts 11:30). The implied subject of the phrase is certainly Moses also according to Theodoret of Cyrus:

“*Why, then, the Law?* This is to be read as a role-play: You want to learn (Paul is saying) what was the reason the Law was imposed? I am the one to teach you: It was imposed on account of the transgressions until the coming of the offspring to whom the promise was made, and it was ordained through angels by means of a mediator: it was given for the attention of the race from whom that offspring was due to come forth according to the flesh; it was given with angels as ministers and Moses serving to convey it (the text calling him a mediator). Now, he made mention of the angels also in the letter to the Hebrews, *“For if the message spoken through angels:”* the God of all appointed them Michael, as blessed Daniel taught us; and he promised mighty Moses to send the angel to accompany the people. Now, one party does not require a mediator (v.20): he mediated between the people and God. But God is one – the one who gave the promise to Abraham, who imposed the Law, and now the one who revealed to us the fulfilment of the promise: it was not a case of one God arranging these things, another those.”

*Commentary on Galatians, pages 12-13*

Among the fathers of the church such Origen, Chrysostom, Jerome, Luther, and Calvin, the Mediator is Christ, being influenced by such texts as 1Timothy 2:5 and Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24.

In the Greek LXX the mediator is regularly used of Moses in his role as God’s spokesman and the word angel means only a messenger. But this does not make it easy for us because Paul seems to say that there were angels not just one who is Moses. In the LXX in particular, it is the law and the commandments of God that are said to have been given by the mediator Moses (cf. Lev 26:46; Num 4:37, 41, 45, 49; 9:23; 10:13; 15:23; 17:5; 33:1; 36:13; Josh 21:2; 22:9; Judg 3:4; 1 Chr 16:40; 2 Chr 33:8; Ps 76:21; 2 Apocalypse of Baruch 2.28). A further strand of tradition in early Judaism saw mediation of any kind as being inferior and stressed God’s direct dealing with his people. This tradition appears as early as the LXX’s translation of Isaiah 63:9: “Not an elder [nor an angel] saved them, but he himself [Lord] saved them” – translating the Hebrew “the angel of his presence saved them.”

In the Judaism of Paul’s day, however, the title “mediator” was commonly assigned to Moses. Philo’s *The Life of Moses*, 2.166, describing Moses’ intercession on behalf of Israel, explicitly refers to him as “mediator and reconciler.” “Assumption of Moses” (1.14, cf. 3.12) portrays Moses as saying that God destined him from the foundation of the world to be “the mediator of his covenant.”

**One God and the mediator**

Verse 20 says *“a mediator, however, does not just represent one party; but God is one!”* This verse tells us what it is about mediation that reflects Paul’s negative attitude to the law which has received multiple comments:

1. That the presence of a mediator implies a plurality that stands in contrast to the oneness of God. But how is this plurality to be defined? A duality of parties involved in a mediated arrangement, God on the one hand and the Jewish people on the other

2. That the plurality has to do with a plurality of persons, though with the persons understood as being groups rather than individuals, and that since a whole group cannot easily engage in a transaction with another group, a mediator is required to act as a go-between – in this case between the angels, through whom the law was ordained, and the Jewish people.

3. That the concept of a mediator itself implies a plurality, which stands in contrast to the oneness of God – the assumption being that any transaction in which a mediator is involved is inferior to one in which God acts directly.

These three possible meanings are all good but the heart of the matter seems to be in the very words of Paul:

1. God is one and therefore the giving comes from one in contrast to more who may be present but the main revelation is not of the angels but of God.
2. Since God is one, the Judaizers argument is of no importance because the New Covenant is New and is from God the One who declares the justification of the sinners.

**The Great Question in Verse 21**

“Is the law, then, opposed to the promises of God?”

Paul now asks whether the logical conclusion of all this is that the law must be seen as standing in opposition to the promise. It is a supplemental question to that of verse 19, but still vital. The answer is “by no means.” “By no means!” or “Absolutely not!” captures the emotional quality of the expression but translates none of the words. How could the law and the promise be inherently opposed? For God is the originator of both. After this exclamation, Paul goes on in characteristic fashion to state his reason (cf. 2:17; also Rom 6:1, 15; 7:7), “for if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would certainly have been on the basis of law.” There is no association or even a relationship between “law” and “life” “Life” in the NT and in Paul’s letters is” spiritual life” (cf. Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36; 2 Cor 3:6; see also John 6:63), which stands in antithesis to “death” with which the law is associated because the Law cannot give life.

Paul’s conclusion is patently saying that the teaching of the Judaizers is false: “then righteousness would certainly have been on the basis of law.” “Being made alive,” “being in Christ,” “being led by the Spirit,” and “being righteous” are for Paul cognate expressions (cf. Gal 2:20; 5:16, 25). So too “on the basis of law,” which Paul, however, insists no law can give life and so righteousness in whatever its dimension does not come from the Law.

**Humans and All of Them are Sinners – Verse 22**

Verse 22 points to the universality of the human condition, “but the Scripture confined everyone without distinction under sin.” The “Scripture”? Does it refer to Scripture generically or to the Law? Paul here may have in mind a particular passage of Scripture that he has cited earlier, either Psalm 143:2, possibly alluded to in Galatians 2:16, or Deuteronomy 27:26, quoted in Galatians 3:10. Paul’s normal use of the singular Greek ***grapha,*** “the Scripture” as in the English KJV and RSV, suggest that he had a particular passage in mind, probably the more immediate antecedent of Galatians 3:10, i.e. Deuteronomy 27:26, a passage he learned from his Rabbinic training but one also probably vividly impressed on him from the synagogue penalty of beating those who trespass the Law (Gal 3:10 is a possible reference). That he had in mind Deuteronomy 27:26 rather than Psalm 143:2 is made more probable by the fact that the function of the law is under discussion, and so a passage from the Pentateuch would be most appropriate. Furthermore, such an implied reference would then explain the words “under sin” to be equivalent to “under a curse” of Galatians 3:10.

The verb means figuratively “confine,” “hem in,” or “imprison.” Paul is then saying that a primary function of the Mosaic law was to bring all humanity under the curse of the law. So reaching back to the expression “because of transgressions” in verse 19 and combining that with the statement “confined all things under sin” here in verse 21, we can say that Paul saw the law functioning in a negative fashion vis-à-vis God’s promise:

1. it brought about a knowledge of sin
2. perhaps even an intensified knowledge by actually increasing sin
3. it brought condemnation by bringing all humanity under its curse. In effect, it was God’s strange work instituted in order to bring us to God’s proper work. It was not opposed to God’s promises, for it operated in the economy of God on a different level or plane than did God’s promises.

The rest of the verse :*“so that the promise that is based on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*”

**The Faith and the Faithfulness of Jesus**

The expression ***pistis*** appears in Paul’s letters only seven times (in addition to twice here at Gal 2:16, see Gal 3:22, Rom 3:22, 26; Eph 3:12; Phil 3:9). If we understood it in terms of the Hebrew term ***emuna*** which means both “faith” and “faithfulness,” then it is not too difficult to view Paul as using *“the faithfulness of God”* in Romans 3:3 and “*the faith of Abraham”* in Romans 4:16 (so even the KJV reads “the faith of Jesus Christ” and “the faith of Christ” in both Gal 3:22 and Gal 2:16, and treats Gal 3:22, Rom 3:22, Eph 3:12, and Phil 3:9 similarly).

In effect, then, Paul uses this expression in his writings to signal the basis for the Christian gospel: that its objective basis is the perfect response of obedience that Jesus rendered to God the Father, both actively in his life and passively in his death. Thus in three places Paul balances out nicely the objective basis for Christian faith (“the faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ”) and mankind’s necessary subjective response (“by faith”):

1. Romans 3:22, “this righteousness of God is ‘through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ”, ‘to all who believe;”

2. Galatians 3:22, “so that the promise which is based upon the faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe those who believe;”

3. Philippians 3:9, “a righteousness that is based upon the faith/faithfulness of Christ” and “that depends upon faith.” These are not slogans used by Paul to undermine the Judaizers but it is at the centre of what Jesus did and what Jesus is. He is the faith and the faithfulness of God’s revelation.

**The Purpose of the Law and the Faith of Jesus**

**Abba Philemon**

Before Christ, the Law was like a doctor who can discover the illness but could not heal. It can reveal the wounds but had no remedy. But now the Doctor and the Remedy are both in one and that is Jesus our Lord and Savior.

The purposes of the law and “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” in verse 22 and the term “the faith” in verse 23 used as parallel to give the Gospel its meaning and foundation.

Verse 22 says that “everyone without distinction” is under the law’s curse. Verse 23 portrays Jews as having been under the law’s guardianship. In speaking of these two functions of the Mosaic law, one condemnatory and the other supervisory because in both cases the feature of constraint is prominent – i.e., condemning sin with respect to “everyone without distinction” (v 22) while supervising life with respect to Jews (v 23). By definition, of course, Jews are included among “everyone without distinction” and so the Mosaic Law exercises its condemnatory function in their case as well. But Jews also lived “under the law” in a special way distinct from all others, which Paul will clarify in his analogy of the Pedagogue, ***paidagagos*** in verses 24-25.

By “the faith” and “the coming faith to be revealed” Paul means not faith generically, but the particular faith referred to in verse 22b that has to do with “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” and humanity’s response of faith.

The central idea of verses 23-25 is the phrase “under the law” with “we were confined/kept in custody” and the present passive participle “being confined, kept in custody under the law, being confined” until the Gospel, the Good News should come … that is Jesus not just the words of the message.

**Abba Philemon**

To have a Guardian or a Custodian who tells you what to do and what not to do is the same as resigning your freedom of choice and having no centre of freedom in you. This destroys three important features of the quality of our life:

1. You cannot discover the difference between evil and good.
2. Your life is not in you but is under another person who directs your life which means you will never mature.
3. This Guardian could easily replace God and become your god.

When my spiritual father was about to die, he said you are no longer an infant and it is about time to be a mature man. He wanted me to have the centre of my freedom in me, not in him.

***Pope’s Notes***

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