

“The Purpose of the Law”

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Galatians 3:15–29 (ESV)

¹⁵ *To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*

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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. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*

²³ *Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*

One objection that some people have to Christianity goes something like this: “There are over 30,000 denominations. If Christianity is true, why can’t you all agree? Why are there so many different churches?” This is not a bad objection, particularly if these questions are sincere. There are obviously many different churches and many different denominations. Why is that so?

Most of the differences between denominations are due to three considerations. One is how churches view the Bible. If a church views the Bible as God’s Word, in any meaningful sense, then the church will base its theology on the Bible. That church will believe that the Bible is true and that Christians must shape their lives around the Bible. If a church views the Bible as man’s thoughts about God, instead of the other way around, then it will think that the Bible can be consulted, but not depended on. If you haven’t figured it out yet, this church is one that

believes that the Bible is God's Word, which means it's authoritative and true. We're doing our best to follow what God has revealed.

Another reason that churches have differences is one of interpretation of the Bible. Different churches may agree that the Bible is God's Word, but they understand the Bible differently. I would argue that most—but not all—of the important differences between denominations arise out of how churches understand the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament.¹ How we make sense of the connection between the Old and New Testaments will affect our views of baptism, the Sabbath, and how we make sense of the law given to the Israelites through Moses. How we make sense of the connection between the Old and New Testaments will affect how we understand the relationship between Israel and the church. How we make sense of the connection between the Old and the New Testaments will affect how we view issues related to the end times. Our view of how the Testaments relate to one another might also affect other issues as well.

The third reason why there are different denominations has to do with how churches decide to conduct business, so to speak. Different churches have different ideas about how to do missions, or how churches should be governed.

Today, we're going to look at a passage that shows us how we can make sense of the whole Bible's plotline. I think that if churches took what Paul writes in Galatians 3 seriously, there would be fewer divisions within Christianity. If we grasp what Paul writes in this passage, we'll be able to make sense of the whole Bible. And that's important, because all of the Bible is God's Word. If we are going to understand who God is, what's he's done in history, and what he demands from us, we need to understand the whole Bible. But the problem is the Bible is a large book. It's hard to grasp all of it. But if we know the basic contours of the Bible's story, we'll be able to understand it better and better.

In the passage before us today, Galatians 3:15-29, Paul contrasts two things: promise and law. His main point is that the promise that God made to Abraham did not depend upon the law. The reason he's doing that is he's trying to show the Galatians that they are not under the law. They don't have to obey the law of the Old Testament, the law given to the Israelites through

¹ I got this idea from Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). They have an abridged version of this lengthy book coming out soon: Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

Moses, in order to become Christians. They don't have to obey that law in order to remain Christians. And he's doing this because there were certain other people who were teaching the Galatians that they needed to obey the law. Essentially, these other people were trying to teach the Galatians, who were Gentiles living in a province of the Roman Empire, that they first had to become Jews in order to become Christians. As we've seen over the past few weeks, that message is contrary to the message that Paul taught. So now his argument is that the promise to Abraham came well before the law was instituted.

That's what Paul is getting at in verses 15-18:

¹⁵To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. ¹⁷This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Paul says that a human covenant or will and testament cannot be annulled once it's been ratified. It's hard to know exactly what type of agreement that Paul has in mind, but the point is that if humans make an agreement that cannot later be changed, how much more does God's covenant with Abraham remain unchanged. The covenant that God made with Abraham rested on a promise to Abraham and his offspring, and this came 430 years before God gave the law to the Israelites when he made another covenant with them at Mount Sinai.

Paul also says that the promise God made was to Abraham and his offspring. Then he makes this odd grammatical argument. He says the promise was to Abraham's "offspring," not "offsprings." He picks up some ambiguity in the promises made to Abraham. Normally, we would think of "offspring" as plural, but Paul wants to show that these promises really lead to one person: Jesus. What promise did Paul have in mind? Perhaps one of these:

Genesis 15:18 (ESV)

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

Genesis 17:7-8 (ESV)

⁷And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you

and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”²

Genesis 22:17–18 (ESV)

¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Though it’s hard to know which of these passages Paul had in mind, God indeed promised that Abraham and his offspring would inherit the land and that the whole earth would be blessed “in [Abraham’s] offspring.” Paul tells us that this promise was really made to Jesus, the true offspring of Abraham. Think about that for a moment: Jesus is the true child of Abraham. Another way of saying that is that he’s true Israel. There are a number of passages in the Bible that indicate that. Israel is called a vine in the Old Testament (Ps. 80:8, Jer. 2:21), but Jesus says he is the true vine (John 15:1). And that’s why Jesus goes to Egypt and comes out, to fulfill what Hosea 11:1 said about Israel: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Matt. 2:15). Israel was tempted in the wilderness for forty years and they sinned; Jesus was tempted for forty days and didn’t sin.³ Jesus did what Israel didn’t and couldn’t do, just as he did what Adam didn’t and couldn’t do.

The whole story of the Old Testament points to Jesus. According to Paul, in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “all the promises of God find their Yes in him.” He is the one in whom all the world will be blessed. He is the one who will inherit the world. In Romans 4:13, Paul writes, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” The Promised Land was a shadow of Abraham’s true inheritance: the world. That’s why it says in Hebrews 11:9-10,

⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

And then in Hebrews 11:13-16, it says,

² For similar verses, see Genesis 13:14-15; 24:7.

³ I find Isaiah 49:2-3 to be convincing proof that Jesus is true Israel. The one with a “mouth like a sharp sword” (v. 2) is “my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (v. 3).

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

The reason that I read those verses is that they indicate that the promise made to Abraham was actually the new heavens and earth, the new creation. Abraham realized that the land he lived in on earth wasn't the fulfillment of the promise. He desired something better. And Jesus is the one who will deliver that promise. He is the one who will bring heaven down to earth (Rev. 21:1-7). He is the one who will bring a blessing to the whole earth. All those who are united to Jesus by faith will receive this promise.

And this promise was made before there the law was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. Paul says the law came 430 years afterward. Exodus 12:40-41 says that the Israelites were in Egypt for 430 years, so maybe Paul has that number in mind. At any rate, his point is that the promise to Abraham doesn't depend on the law. The promise isn't made good through obedience to the law and it's not invalidated because of disobedience to the law. The inheritance—of Jesus, salvation, the Spirit, and life in the new creation—comes through promise, not the law.

At this point, you may wonder, if this promise came to Abraham before the law, then why did God give the law at all? What's the point? Paul anticipates that question and he answers it in the next few verses.

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. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

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. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So, if the promise isn't fulfilled by the law, then why did God give it? "Because of transgressions." There's some debate about what this means. Some people think it means that the law restrained sin. But in Romans 7, Paul says that the law actually increased sin. And if the law could restrain sin, then the false teachers might be right. Other people think the law defined or

revealed sin. We wouldn't know what sin is unless there was a standard, a measuring stick, that showed what was right and what was wrong.⁴

Still other theologians believe that the law was given to increase transgressions. That's what Paul says in Romans 5:20: "Now the law came in to increase the trespass." We see that's what happened with Israel. When God gave them the law, he did it after he rescued them out of slavery in Egypt. And the law was good. It showed them how to relate to God and how to relate to each other. It told them how to live. If they followed God's law, they would be blessed. Yet the law produced bad effects. Israel actually sinned more after they received the law.

That's what Paul says in Romans 7. He says that the law tells him about sin: "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" (v. 7). But the law provoked a sinful response within him: "But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (v. 8). The problem wasn't the law; it was sinful desires within people. That's why Paul can also say, "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (v. 12). When sinful people are confronted with the law, they sin more. The law reveals that we're sinful. It also shows that it is not the answer to our sin. In other words, it leads us to Christ. His redemption and the gift of the Holy Spirit are the only true answer to sin.

So that's Paul's point. Law cannot give life and righteousness. The law can only imprison everything under sin. In fact, Paul says that "Scripture imprisoned everything under sin" (v. 22). Perhaps he means that the Old Testament shows the problem of sin: it clearly reveals that everyone is a sinner and needs the salvation that only God can bring. Also, everything—not just everyone—is imprisoned because of sin. In Romans 8, Paul says that the whole universe is in bondage to sin.

Last week, we saw that "Scripture . . . preached the gospel . . . to Abraham" (v. 8). According to Paul, what Scripture does, God does. So, in a sense, it was God's plan that everyone be imprisoned under sin until Jesus came to redeem his people.⁵ The law shows that people can't be rescued any other way than the promise. People can't save themselves through following the law. Our only hope is God's grace, a gift that he promises to give, not because of anything that we do. The promise is given to all those who have faith in Jesus.

⁴ "The law provides the standard, the measuring stick, by which sin is identified." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 240.

⁵ Schreiner (ibid., 244): "Scripture here personifies God, indicating that it was God's will that all be imprisoned under sin. Sin is personified here and conceived of as a power that exercises control over human beings. Such a reading is supported by the close parallel in Rom 11:32."

(Paul also says implies that the covenant with Abraham was superior to the one made with Israel at Sinai because that covenant was mediated through angels and Moses. In Jewish tradition, the angels gave the law to Moses, who gave it to Israel. This is based on Deuteronomy 33:2 , and is supported by Acts 7:53 and Hebrews 2:2. In contrast, God made a covenant directly with Abraham. And since the covenant was made ultimately with Abraham's seed, Jesus, it didn't involve any mediation.)

Paul continues the theme of imprisonment in the next two verses, verses 23 and 24:

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

Paul says that before faith came, everyone was captive under the law. He doesn't mean that people in the Old Testament didn't have faith. After all, he's already established that Abraham had faith. Though not all of Israel had faith, there were many who did have faith in God and his promises. Paul is referring to this age, the one marked by faith in Jesus. Prior to this age, everyone was held captive. People were slaves to sin.⁶ Everyone who still lives according to the law, and not according to faith, is held captive.

Paul also says that the law was a guardian until Jesus came. In the Roman Empire, a guardian was usually a slave who watched over children until they became adults. The point is that the law watched over God's people for a time, and the point of the law was to lead people to Christ. The law taught people about sin and served as a babysitter until the fullness of time had come, when God sent his Son (Gal. 4:4). Paul makes the point clearly: the law was intended for only a limited time.

What was the goal of all of this? The goal is Jesus. He is the end, or the goal of the law, according to Romans 10:4. And the goal was to lead people to Jesus, so they could have faith in him, so people could be united to him, and therefore become God's children. Paul makes this clear in the next few verses:

²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ 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

⁶ This reality was recognized by both Ezra and Nehemiah though they had returned to the Promised Land after the exile into Babylon (Ezra 9:9; Neh. 9:36).

Jesus.²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

If you are “in Christ Jesus”—if you have faith in him, you aren't under the guardian of law. And you're not just a child of Abraham. You are a son of God! The reason that Paul says that we are “sons of God” and not “sons and daughters of God” is because at that time, it was the sons who were heirs. They received the inheritance of their Father. And that's what Paul is saying here. We are “heirs according to the promise.” We have been adopted as God's children through faith. That's the climax of the gospel. It's something I'll talk more about next week as we look at the beginning of chapter 4.

Paul says that all who have been baptized into Christ have put on him. He's probably thinking about the whole beginning experience of salvation, from repentance of sins to faith to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to baptism. When someone puts their faith in Christ, he or she is united to him. The Christian is “in Christ.” That means his or her life becomes absorbed into his. The Christian is no longer his own. He is identified with Jesus. In Colossians 3:9-11, Paul writes,

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Putting on the new self is really putting on Christ (Rom. 13:14). We are covered with his righteousness. The person who is a Christian is no longer identified as a Jew or a Gentile, or by their economic standing, or even by their gender. All Christians are one in Christ.

Now, I have to add this about verse 28: This verse is often taken out of context. Some people think this means that there shouldn't be gender roles any more. However, we need to consider the context: Paul is talking about salvation. Jews and Greeks, or Gentiles, have equal access to Christ, just as slaves and free people do and just as males and females do. They all have an equal inheritance in Christ. But in his other letters, Paul talks quite a bit about the roles that men and women play. What's amazing is that all of who believe in Jesus—regardless of gender or race or social status—have the same inheritance, and they are all God's children. I should also point out that this verse would be good news to women, since the false teachers in Galatia stressed circumcision, something that obviously only applies to men. No matter who you are

or where you come from, if you have faith in Christ, you are a son of God and an heir of the promise.

Now that we've looked at the passage, I want us to think about three things.

First, consider God's timing. God worked out a plan of salvation that took roughly two thousand years from Abraham to Jesus. Why did God take such a long time? Why didn't God send Jesus into the world immediately after sin entered into his creation? It's hard to know exactly, but I think the Bible shows that God had to take his time to show Israel who he was. God revealed himself through his actions—through rescuing Israel from Egypt, providing for them in the wilderness, leading them into the Promised Land, rescuing them again when they disobeyed and their enemies threatened them, and so on. God also had to reveal himself to Israel through his written Word—through the giving of the law, through the prophets, and through other writings like the Psalms and Proverbs. By taking his time to do these things, God revealed patterns of creation, provision, judgment, and salvation, which anticipated what the Messiah would come and do. In that way, God prepared the way for his ultimate revelation in his incarnate Word, Jesus.

The key thing to know is God's timing is not ours.⁷ God's plans are greater than ours. God's plans unfold slowly. Abraham didn't see the promise fulfilled in his lifetime. Neither did Moses or David or Isaiah. In Luke 2, there are two elderly people who see the infant Jesus at the temple. They are named Anna and Simeon. They waited their whole lives just to see the Messiah, and they didn't get to see him speak or perform miracles, much less die for their sins. The same thing might be true of us. We may not see Jesus return in our lifetime. We may not understand the significance of our lives before we die. The things that we do today may not produce effects until after we're gone. The words that you say to someone may not take root until later.

The second thing I want us to think about is the law in the Old Testament. When God gave the law to Israel at Sinai, it was good thing. He gave them the law after he saved them in Egypt. And the law taught the people about God and his holiness. It taught them how to live. Just think about the Ten Commandments. It was for their good to put God first and not to make idols. It was for their good to honor their parents and not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet. If you read through Exodus 20-23, or through Deuteronomy, you can see that many of the laws

⁷ See Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

deal with justice. They deal with fairness. When someone causes a problem, restitution needs to be made.

I've been reading through Deuteronomy and I was struck by chapter 19. In Deuteronomy 19, there are provisions for what happens when someone is murdered. If someone killed another person by accident, then the killer could go to one of a few cities of refuge, to seek protection from someone trying to avenge the life of the person who was killed. But if the murder was premeditated—if it was intentional—then that man would be killed. Yet there had to be at least two or three witnesses. A single witness wasn't enough to convict a person, probably because one person could lie. This is all just and fair.

The problem is that when Israel received the law, it increased their sin. And the many demands of the law—including all the sacrifices—were weighty. In Acts 15, when the apostles discuss what is required of Gentile Christians, Peter said that the law was something “that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (v. 10).

And the law could be harsh. Think about this passage from Deuteronomy 21:18-21:

¹⁸“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, ¹⁹ then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, ²⁰ and they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ ²¹ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

Think about that! A disobedient son, one who didn't listen to his parents, could be put to death! Now, how many of us were disobedient to our parents? I know that I have been a disobedient son. But here's the point: when it comes to our relationship with God, all of us have been disobedient children and all of us deserve to be put to death. The law shows how serious our sin is.

Now think about this: Jesus is the true Son of God, and he never disobeyed God. He never broke God's law. He always put God first. He had no idols. He honored both his parents on earth and his Father in heaven. He never had murderous thoughts or lust in his heart. He didn't lie and he didn't covet. Yet he died so that we can live. Paul says that those who are under the law are held captive by it. Jesus allowed sinful people to arrest him, to hold him captive, and

to charge him with false crimes. He was held captive on the cross until he died. He did all of this so that we could be set free. And this was God's plan all along.

Here's the third and final thing I want us to think about: How does the Old Testament law apply to us today? According to Paul, it doesn't. At least not directly. The law was put in place until the time of Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). The law is fulfilled by Jesus and it has no power over us. In Romans 6:14, Paul writes, "since will have no dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace."

Does that mean we can do whatever we want? No. Christians are not supposed to keep sinning. This idea is found in Paul's letters and it's very clear in 1 John 3:9: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." But now we are led by the Holy Spirit, we are motivated by God's grace, and our goal is love. We are supposed to love God and love others, and it is this love that fulfills the law.

That doesn't mean we define love however we want. Love is tied to justice and holiness. And there are many commandments in the New Testament. Romans 13:8-10 ties love to certain commandments:

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

A few verses later, Paul says that Christians shouldn't be caught up in drunkenness and sexual immorality and fighting and jealousy (v. 13). There are several vice lists in the New Testament. These are lists of things that Christians shouldn't do. We'll see one in Galatians 5. And nine of the Ten Commandments are reiterated in the New Testament. (The only one that isn't clearly reiterated is the Sabbath commandment, because it is fulfilled by Jesus.)

All of this should have some effect on how we view things like the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 31:13). It is fulfilled in Jesus, who gives us true rest from our labors (Matt. 11:28; Col. 2:16-17). That's why we're not Seventh Day Adventists. I'm a Baptist because I believe baptism should be reserved for people who make a credible profession of faith. Presbyterians and other Christians who baptize infants see baptism as

something similar to circumcision, a sign of the covenant for covenant members and their children. But I think that's a misreading of how the Old and New Testaments are related. Specifically, it's a misunderstanding of the new covenant. Those who are "in Christ," who have faith in him, are the ones who are baptized into Christ.

There are many other ways that people can make theological mistakes by cherry picking from the Old Testament.⁸ In order to understand the Old Testament rightly, we have to view it through lens of Jesus. How did he fulfill the law? What is commanded of Christians? What are principles that run through the whole Bible?

We are in a very privileged place in history. We have the fullness of God's revelation in his Son and in the Bible. We should praise God for that. But let's not take it for granted. Let's do our best to understand all of God's Word, and let's tell others about it.

⁸ "We have a tendency to read the Scriptures apart from the progress of revelation, without paying heed to the unfolding narrative, as if all of Scripture occupies the same place in the landscape of God's plan. This was apparently the way the false teachers read the Scriptures. Commands in the Mosaic law were just as valid as any other part of the scriptural narrative." Schreiner, *Galatians*, 232.