

Sermon Series: *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*

Why Did God Give the Law?

Galatians 3:19-22

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.*

Hardwired to Ask Why?

There appears to be hardwired within every human the innate desire to ask the question “why?” This trait presents itself around the age of two, often to the complete frustration of young parents. Toddlers at times incessantly ask “Why?” about anything and everything imaginable. Apparently we naturally assume there is a purpose beneath and behind all that we experience.

Since God is the Creator of all that exists, perhaps this is our first clue to the fact of His unseen presence. This may be what is hinted at in Ecclesiastes 3:11 when we are told that God “has put eternity into the heart of man.” The clumsy yearning to know why may be our first spiritual steps towards our heavenly Father.

Asking “why?” is beneficial. It is a good question to ask, even if mom & dad at times become weary of the explaining. Nevertheless, God has called parents this privileged task. In His wise providence He has ordained that parents, the ones who love their children most, should have the earliest opportunity help shape within children a God-centered worldview.

We need to know why we celebrate Thanksgiving. We need to know why we cannot touch the flame. We need to know why we should look both ways before crossing the street. We need to know why the red, yellow, and green lights are hanging from the poles at intersections. If we fail to know why certain things, are the way they are, it could get us killed. Asking why can save your life. This is true in the physical realm. We will see this is also true in the spiritual realm.

Why Did God Give the Law?

The first verse in our text today, v.19, Paul asks the question, “Why did God give the law?” He anticipates this question based upon what he has previously argued. In 3:1-5 Paul reminded the Galatians that they had received the Holy Spirit when they heard the gospel message and believed it by faith. Their life in Christ began when they received His Holy Spirit by *faith*, and not by works. The law did not give them the Holy Spirit.

In 3:6-9 Paul clearly demonstrated that justification only comes through faith and never through the law and pointed to Abraham as the first and greatest example of this. He then explained in 3:10-13 that desiring to be justified by the law only places one under a curse.

In 3:14-18 Paul states the tremendous truth that through Jesus the curse of the law is removed. Jesus is THE offspring of Abraham, the one to whom the promise was given. We also learn that the promised blessing of Abraham, which was intended to benefit “all nations of the earth,” is the giving of the Holy Spirit Himself.

Paul’s central point in vs. 14-18 is that God’s promise is received by faith and not by keeping the law. When God gave the law He did not annul His previous promise to Abraham & his offspring. Paul anticipates the rebuttal of the Judaizers. He imagines them saying something like, “OK Paul, if what you are saying is true, then why did God give the law? If justification has always been by faith and always will be by faith, as you have argued, then what in the world is the purpose of the law? If the law is not the means through which we become right with God, then what in the world is it’s purpose?”

Paul gives a brief answer, in verse 19, and then immediately goes on to point out two ways in which the law is inferior to the promise.

Galatians 3:19

19 *Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions,*

Paul says the law was given **because of transgressions**. The word “transgressions” (Greek *parabasis*) means “stepping over” or “to cross over the boundary.” It means you know the boundary and you cross it anyway. This is not the word for sin (*hamartia*). What could this mean?

To Restrain Transgressions

This could mean that God gave the law in order to stop transgressions or to *restrain* the “crossing over the bounds.” If this is true, then the purpose of the law would be corrective. It would have been given to correct some error.

You might think of someone who purchases a piece of ground and plans to use it to cultivate a beautiful flower garden. However, as he sections the land off and begins the planting, he discovers that the local villagers use a particular field as a shortcut. He can’t grow flowers if there is a constant stream of foot traffic. So he puts up a “No Trespassing” sign in order to restrain the transgressing of the field. He uses the “law” to stop the crossing of his field. The sign is used then to correct the problem. So restraining transgression could be what Paul means.

To Reveal Transgressions

Or he could mean that the law was given to *reveal* transgressions, that is to make them known. In this case the purpose of the law would be cognitive rather than corrective. Instead of correcting the problem, the law would serve to make one cognitively aware of a problem that would have otherwise remained hidden.

For example, your doctor might suspect that you don't trust her, but when she gives you a prescription and you wrap it up and throw it in the trash before you walk out of her office, then the previously hidden distrust is made perfectly evident. This is exactly what Paul writes in Romans 7:7.

Romans 7:7

If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

One of the purposes of the law then is to reveal latent sin. It is not as though Paul had never coveted until he heard this command. Certainly, he had. However, when he was confronted with the law, he was then made aware that that particular action of his desires was sinful in the sight of God. Coveting in our eyes might not be so problematic. However, the reality is that coveting is corruption of the soul and the law simply reveals or exposes that corruption.

Romans 3:20

For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his [i.e. God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Through the law comes knowledge of sin. The law reveals sin that is already present within our hearts. A young runner may think he is a capable and prepared runner until the actual command to run is given by the coach and he discovers how easily winded he is. Or you may think your house is in perfectly good condition as you ready it for sale. However, when the command that the house be first inspected is acted upon, certain defects might be revealed. When the inspector comes with flash light and begins digging and poking and prodding, it might be revealed that your attic or basement is covered with mold. Or he may discover that there is a hidden crack in the foundation.

This understanding, that the law reveals sin, seems to fit best in the context of all that Paul has been arguing for. The law comes in and exposes that sin that was already present in the human heart. We might have been tempted to think that we were pretty obedient children, until the law came in and demanded that we obey in several ways. Then suddenly something happened. When we received the command to obey, something within us rose up against that command and the rebellion of our hearts was exposed.

Think about your own personal reaction to anyone who tells you to do something. Do you not almost immediately have a first impulse to do the opposite of whatever it is they are telling you to do even if you agree with them?

This is why Paul wrote "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Gal 3:10). The law demands perfect obedience, yet we are completely unable to obey all of its demands and so we are left under condemnation.

The Inferiority of the Law

After briefly answering the question of why God sent the law, Paul quickly moves on to list two ways in which the law is inferior to the promise. First he says it was temporary. Second he says because it was given through intermediaries. Paul says,

Until the Offspring Should Come

Galatians 3:19

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...

The law was given **until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made**. We know that Jesus is **the offspring** to whom the promise had been made (Gal 3:16). We also know the promise is God's Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14). So what does this mean that the law was given *until the offspring should come*? What happened in relation to the law when the offspring came that could not otherwise have happened?

In What Sense Is The Law Is Temporary?

Paul clearly indicates there is a temporary aspect to the law. However we also know from Jesus that there is a permanent aspect of the law. For Jesus Himself said, *"I did not come to abolish the law or the Prophets... (Matt 5:17)*. Furthermore, we know that it is still as true today as it was the day the law was given that we should not worship any other god but Yahweh, or worship idols, or take His name in vain, or defile the sabbath, or dishonor parents, or murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or lie, or covet. Intuitively we know that something of the law remains. Yet when Jesus came, what about the law was done away with?

When we look at Jesus, what do we see? We see a man who was the Son of God. Jesus is Messiah, whose coming had been prophesied, as we heard read from Micah earlier this morning, hundreds of years before He was born. His birth happened a bit over 2,000 years ago. What was the Lord doing by giving us these prophetic clues, yet waiting so long to fulfill the promise?

Micah lived 700 years before the birth of Jesus, yet the Spirit of God in him revealed to him the exact city in which Jesus would be born — Bethlehem. (There are over 100 specific prophecies fulfilled during the lifetime of Jesus.)

About 700 hundred years before the birth of Micah, the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And just under 700 years before Moses (645¹ to be exact) God gave a promise to Abraham and his offspring that in him "all nations of the earth would be blessed."

Why would God give a promise that He would not fulfill until a little over 2,000 years later? What was He doing during all that time? He was ensuring that the promise He had made could actually be kept.

Romans 4:16

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

God was guaranteeing that the promise could be delivered. He did this by proving that the promise could not be received by human effort. No one would ever be good enough to earn this promise, so the promise could only be received by faith. If the promise rested on human effort, we would have never received it. So God based the promise on grace so that He could be sure that He could deliver it.

¹ Paul states in 3:17 that the law "came 430 years afterward." The promise given to Abraham was repeated to Isaac and Jacob and the law came 430 years after the promise was repeated last to Jacob.

God gave the law in about fourteenth century B.C. Then He waited about 700 years before sending Messiah. Why did God wait so long? Why wait so long and allow things to get so bad?

Isn't that the point?

Is not 700 years long enough for us to get the picture that no one can keep all of the righteous commands of God? Is that not long enough for us to understand that the human heart is so corrupt that apart from God's outlandish, unbelievable grace there is no way on earth for us to be holy? Is not 700 years long enough to expose all the permanently petrified sinful sediment at the base of the helpless, hardened, human hearts? Isn't 700 years long enough for us to discover that we are spiritually dead and we cannot make ourselves alive? 700 years is a long time.

Surely if someone was righteous enough or strong enough or determined enough to fulfill the law, then wouldn't they have done it? Wouldn't someone have come along who could have achieved obedience? Think about Moses. No one knew the law better than him. Yet, even He didn't he keep the law? Even the great Moses could not perfectly obey! Think of Joshua, and mighty Samson, Samuel, David and Solomon, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah and all the great prophets. Has there not been one righteous Jew with whom God is completely pleased?

Answer: Yes, there has been one and only one in the whole of human history, and His name is Jesus. So in relation to the law, what do we see when look at Jesus. We see a man who was anointed by God with His Holy Spirit. His birth was brought about through the working of the Holy Spirit and His public ministry began in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a man so filled with God's Holy Spirit that He perfectly obeyed.

Jesus could stand before a crowd of people and say, "*Everything I do pleases the Father!*" (John 8:29).

Really? Everything?

Only Jesus could say, "*Everything I say I have heard from the Father*" (John 8:38).

Really? Everything?

Jesus is the only human being who was so controlled and filled by God's Holy Spirit that He perfectly obeyed the law. So the law was given until Jesus because the law pointed to humanity's COMPLETE inability to keep the law. No human being can obey the law in his or her own strength. The law remained unfulfilled for 1400 years until Jesus came.

Matthew 5:17

Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophet; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

And fulfill them He did! When we look at Jesus we see the first instance where the law no longer has authority over a human being. For the law only has power over those who break it. The law has no power over those who keep it. The law can do nothing to those who always obey it.

I Timothy 1:9-11

9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers,

10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,
11 in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

The law stands only for those who break it. The law is not given to those who are righteous. It was given only for those who disobey it. Therefore the law is not for those who are righteous by faith. The law only condemns the disobedient. The curse of the law falls only upon those who fail to perfectly obey its demands — which is all of humanity, except Jesus.

But if Jesus perfectly obeyed the law, then why did He still endure the curse of the law. He bore the curse of the law on behalf of those who would put faith in him. Therefore, those who are in Jesus by faith are freed from the curse of the law! The power of the law is broken over those who are by faith in Christ.

How? Because they have become heirs of the promise, and the promise is the Holy Spirit. All who put faith in Jesus are given the promise, gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the **offspring to whom the promise had been made**. Therefore, He pours out His Spirit in the hearts of all who trust in Him.

The law cannot do this. The law cannot give the Spirit. Look at verse 21.

Galatians 3:21

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.

Paul anticipates another argument by the Judaizers. They might say, “If righteousness cannot be obtained by obeying the law, then is it contrary to (or against) the promises of God?” Paul says, “No it isn’t. It isn’t because the law was never intended to give life!” The law was intended to reveal the deadness of your own sinful spirit. Its purpose was to expose unrighteousness not deliver righteousness. Its purpose was to condemn sin, not communicate life.

The law is like an MRI machine that reveals the cancer of sin. The law was intended to reveal the disease not cure the sickness. The law is not the medication that kills the cancer. If a doctor to mistakes an MRI machine for the medication, then he will kill the patient. To tell a sick patient to swallow medication that will cure his disease is one thing. However, for a doctor to tell a patient to swallow an MRI machine is insane. It is even more insane for the patient to think that the cure to his cancer is found in the MRI machine because that was the instrument through which his sickness was revealed.

It is just as insane to take the law and attempt to use it as a means of earning righteousness. It can’t be done. It’s like trying to smell the color red. It is impossible. Granting righteousness is not the purpose for which the law was given. If you try to use keeping the law as an instrument of earning righteousness, then you will die. Attempting to earn righteousness through self-willed morality will get you killed. Hanging the eternal destiny of your soul upon the broken hook of your own moral effort is just as smart as swallowing an MRI machine.

Two things stand against us which keep us from God; the deadness of our souls because of our sin and our lack of active righteousness. In order to enjoy the company of God, we need life and we need righteousness. These are two things we need, but these are two things the law cannot give us.

These two can only come to us by faith through the Holy Spirit. Both of those things come through the Holy Spirit, not the law. *The Holy Spirit is the source of spiritual life.*

2 Corinthians 3:6

God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,

8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?

9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.

John 6:63

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail.

Romans 8:9-10

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

This is why God gave the law -- so that everyone would be imprisoned under the power of sin, so the Holy Spirit could be given to all who have faith in Jesus. God trapped everyone through law under the power of sin so that the only way of escape would be by faith in Jesus. In this way, the promise of the Holy Spirit can be guaranteed because the promise is solely based upon God's own determination to keep His word and not upon any effort of our own.

The Promise Was Made Without Mediators

This brings us to the second reason that the promise is superior to the law. The promise was given without mediators while the law was given through mediators. [Some commentators claim that the last half of verse 19 and verse 20 are among the hardest Pauline verses to interpret. One commentator said there are over 300 interpretations of this verse.] God personally cut a covenant with Abraham. God gave Abraham the promises directly without anyone between Him and God.

We find the details of this covenant in Genesis 15. The reason that making a covenant was referred to as "cutting a covenant" was because during the covenant ceremony an animal was cut in half and the two halves laid opposite each other. Then the two parties entering into the covenant would walk between the two halves of the animal and say something to the effect of, "If I do not keep the terms of this covenant, may I be cut in half as this animal has been cut in half."

This is what we find in Genesis 15, only the astonishing difference in this covenant is that Abraham does not pass through the two halves of the animals. He was sound asleep when this happened. Only God passed between the two severed animals. God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep, and as God passed through (in the form of a smoking pot and a flaming torch) he spoke to Abraham and gave him the promises. So the keeping of the terms of that covenant were ultimately up to God Himself.

God gave a promise by entering into a covenant directly with Abraham without any mediators. The law was a covenant between God and the people of Israel corporately with Moses and angels being

the mediators. The promise was given *individually and directly* to Abraham by God Himself. However, the law was given *corporately and indirectly* to the people of Israel through both angels and Moses.

That angels were involved in the giving of the law are directly referenced in Acts 7:53 and Hebrews 2:2 and is hinted at in Deuteronomy 33:2 and Psalm 68:17.

The promise was given to Abraham and to His offspring who was Jesus. Jesus and God are one (Matt 11:27; John 1:18; 10:30; 17:21). So we might say that God made a promise to Himself, the keeping of which was dependent upon His own power and He decided to include all humans who were united to Jesus by faith.

The law had requirements that the people of Israel agreed to fulfill but never did. The promise was enacted upon God's own requirements of Himself, which He was fully able to fulfill and in Jesus has fulfilled every single promise He has ever made (2 Cor 1:20).

Summary

The law was given to uncover sinful rebellion that fills every disobedient human heart. Because of our sin we are spiritually dead. The law was never intended to give spiritual life, it was given to reveal our need of Spiritual life. God made a personal promise to Abraham that was fulfilled in the person of Jesus. The promise is life and righteousness which come to us when we put our faith in Jesus.

The law is not the cure for our problem. It is simply a diagnostic tool, that reveals to us how far from God we really are. The law reveals that we are spiritually dead and completely without righteousness. However, God has promised to give us both spiritual life and righteousness by giving us His very own Holy Spirit who brings us to life and begins to work righteousness in us. Jesus made this possible. He freed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. The law kills but it is the Spirit who gives life.

Lord Jesus bring life to those in this room who need life. Holy Spirit come and bring life and righteousness. Free us from all forms of legalism. Free us from thinking that we could ever be good enough to save ourselves. Lord, let each one of us walk according to Your Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.