

Introduction

I can hardly ever complete a project at home without running into a problem of some kind. A couple weeks ago I was attempting to install one of those outdoor camera/light combinations above my garage. The wires were already there. There had been a light there before. How hard could it be? Well I mounted the light and connected the wiring, but it didn't work, so I returned it to the store. Within a couple nights, however, I noticed that the exterior lights on either side of my garage were not working either. I studied the situation and could not figure out the problem. So I called Steve, Steve Hartung. Steve came out and began looking over the situation and was puzzled as well until he asked me some questions. He asked if there had been a photo-cell above the garage. I said, "Oh, yeah, that is what I took off before I tried installing the fixture." Then it all made sense. As it was, the wiring that was routed to the photo cell would not work correctly without it. Armed with that knowledge, Steve had everything lit up again within about 5 minutes. It is amazing what a little knowledge can do to clear up confusion. This morning in Galatians we are going to lay hold of some knowledge that helps clear the confusion about the law given through Moses. When we realize what Paul explains, things begin to fall into place.

[Read text and Pray]

Paul answers the question, "Why the law?" And he has several things to say. This morning I want you to see the purpose of the law in regard to these distinct items—the purpose of the law in regard to sin, in regard to the promise, and in regard to Christ. Each of these items is noted in verse 19 and is teased out in verses 20-24.

We begin with ...

I. The Purpose of the Law In Regard to Sin.

"Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions." We get a very good idea of what Paul means by looking at other scripture texts and by considering the words he uses here in this text.

Let's start with the word transgressions. The law was added because of transgressions. This term refers to a particular category of sin. It means "to step over the boundary." It implies the breaking of a law or disobedience to a particular command. That is what happened in the very first sin. Adam had received a command from God NOT to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Along with Eve he disregarded and acted against God's commandment, thus committing transgression. Sinning without the law is still sinning, but sinning against the law is also transgression. Adam transgressed God's law. Between Adam and Moses sin was in the world, but it was not considered transgression because the law had not been given. The way back into the garden was shielded so that no one could get in and break the law by eating again from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So the law was added to increase awareness of sin through the committing of transgressions.

Let me illustrate. When children irritate one another, they will often hit, bite, or kick their adversary, usually a brother or a sister. Without any qualms, they just haul off and do it. It is not right. In essence they are committing murder. However, they do not know the law and feel no shame in their sin. It all changes, however, when a parent steps in and scolds the child and instructs them not to do it. Sin in their heart came out in their retaliation, but they did not count it as sin until the law. When the parent gives a scolding and commands the child not to do that again, the law has been

given. Now, when they assault their brother or sister, they will not only be sinning, they will be transgressing the law. And their awareness of their sin will increase. This is also the effect of God's giving the law. It amplifies the wrong of sin by making it also a transgression.

Paul describes his realization of the sin of covetousness because the law says, "you shall not covet." It is not that coveting was not wrong without the law. But he would not have recognized coveting as a sin without the law saying, "You shall not covet." And now he is coveting not only as a sin but also as a transgression. And so his awareness of sin is increased.

Now in addition, the giving of the law results in an increase in the amount of sin and transgression. In Romans 5:20, Paul writes that, "the law came in to increase the trespass." So think of the many aspects of God's law which apart from the command of God would not be sin. Let's say to observe Passover. Until God gave a command to observe the Passover in a particular way, not observing Passover was not a sin. But once God gave the command, the law was laid down. To violate that law is to trespass against God even if it was not a sin to not observe Passover before God commanded it.

It is a similar thing to making up one's bed. In and of itself, it is not a sin not to make up one's bed. However, if a mother tells her child to make up their bed, she is giving a command. She is in effect making a law. And now what otherwise would not be a sin—not making up one's bed—becomes a sin if one does not do it. Specifically, the child who refuses to obey is now transgressing the command of the mother. Before the command there were fewer sins. But now with the command there are more sins. So it is with God and his law. The addition of the law increased the trespass; it multiplied the number of transgressions and sins. Instead of a decrease in the amount of sin, the law functions to multiply it. So, then the law increases our culpability for sin by leading to an increase in the number of our sins and the ways in which we sin and transgress against God.

Now what does all this increasing of sin and trespasses accomplish? First, of course—we have already said it, but let's say it again—the law increases our awareness of sin. It makes cognizant that we sin and that we do so in a myriad of ways. It already is a fact. We are born in sin. But we do not take it into account without the law. The law was never given so that we could think of ourselves as a good person. It was meant to keep us from hiding and escaping from the ugly truth that our hearts are dark and stained and corrupt and polluted. And we are not any one of us good persons. As Paul said in Romans 3, "by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Liars. Blasphemers. Adulterers. Covetous. Murders. Idolaters. Disrespecters of God. Thieves. This is who we are from the heart.

So the law helps us. It helps us see ourselves for who we are. It increases our awareness of our sin. But it does more. Notice the strong words with which Paul described the situation of the one who transgresses the law. If you look to verse 22, you see the word imprisoned. The terms used in other translations include shut up, confined, locked up, and bound. Says MacArthur, the word here is "a strong term meaning to lock up securely, to enclose on all sides with no way of escape." Then if you look to verse 23 in the ESV, you see the word captive. Biblically we are taken back to the captivity experienced by the Israelites under the tyranny of Pharaoh. He was squeezing the life out of the Israelites one day after another. And he was determined not to let them go. They were in misery under the heavy load they bore. It was too much for them. Remember how Pharaoh increased their work load. He called on them to go and gather their own straw but the brick quota would remain unchanged. So the demand was greater than they could bear. They failed to meet the quota and the Egyptians beat the Israelites and continued to demand more than they could do.

That, friends, is the law. It demands more than we can do. And it calls for our punishment for failing to do it. We are held captive. We are locked away in a prison from which the law offers no escape.

And thus we see that there is no hope in the law. There is no hope in any law. It can give no life. So it is that Paul declares in verse 21, "If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." But there is no law that can do anything for us other than to call for our condemnation. It can only keep us under its tyranny and hostility. The problem is not the law. The problem is us. But the law shows us who we are and cannot change our situation. It cannot help the one who has broken it. It is incapable of giving life.

The conclusion then is not to put hope in the law. Galatians, do not listen to those who are offering hope for your right standing with God in the law! Brothers and sisters, get off the treadmill of trying to keep the law in order to try and please God, in order to try and draw near God. Every time you resort to depending on your performance to please God, you are depending on you. And the law condemns you. The law cannot help your standing. It cannot improve your communion. It cannot entice God to listen to your prayers. It cannot translate into a better life. The law imprisons; it binds; it holds you captive. Do not look for help to the law! In respect to sin, it's only good purpose is to put a mirror before you and show you that you are not a good person, and you can never hope in what you can do. It will make you miserable. It will demand of you more than you are capable of producing. And it will condemn you for it.

Now let's turn to ...

II. The Purpose of the Law In Regard to the Promise.

Paul points to a number of aspects of the law which have regard to God's promise. Now, remember, the promise we are talking about is that God would bless Abraham and make of him a great nation through his offspring Jesus. It is a promise to be appropriated by faith alone and not by works. Adding works would destroy the promissory aspect of God's provision. I am going to show you several facets of the law which point to its purpose in regard to the promise. But overall, the purpose is this: the law was given by God to magnify the glory of the promise.

You see, when you have nothing to compare something to, you may not appreciate its full majesty. I am sure that if you have ever been into a jewelry store, you have noticed how the diamonds sparkle and the gold shines. They are all as you have never seen them before. It is because the marketers of jewelry know how to display their goods. Often they set them against a dark velvet background and under the lights so that the contrast magnifies and accentuates the distinctive and captivating beauty of the jewels. God's giving of the law operates like the velvet background behind jewelry to help us see the superior glory of the promise.

The law reflects the superior glory of the promise, in the first place, in view of the way in which it was given. Paul talks about how the law came in verses 19-20. He says the law "was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one but God is one."

The important emphasis of these words of explanation is not easily discernable. But with a bit of explanation it becomes clear. That the law was put in place through angels is not immediately clear as we read Exodus 20 and how God gave the law to Moses on Sinai. And yet several New Testament texts highlight the role of angels in delivering the law and speaking it to the people (Acts 7:38, 53; Hebrews 2:2). Moses himself was an intermediary between God and the people. The involvement of an intermediary implies more than one, obviously. Hence, the Mosaic covenant was dependent not

only on God but also on the people. Both parties would have to hold up their side in order for the covenant blessings to be realized.

The stark contrast then between the law and the promise is that the law depended upon more than one party, emphasized by the fact that it was mediated. Meanwhile, the promise depends only on one—the God who made it. And he made that promise not through an intermediary but directly to Abraham. No middle-man here. So the promise is evidenced to be more majestic because in contrast to the Mosaic covenant, it was given directly to Abraham and it was a promise independent of Abraham's ability to meet any conditions. So there is a superior glory to the promise because of the way in which it was given.

A second point of contrast is that the law was always meant to act in a temporary role of support for the fulfillment of the promise. Paul states this in verse 19. The law was added because of transgressions UNTIL the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. The law came 430 years AFTER the promise and it would only be in effect temporarily. The temporal nature of the law is emphasized again down in verse 25 which says that now that faith has come, we are no longer under the guardian of the law. So, wow, the promise is eternal while the law is temporary.

And then the law is in a supportive role to the promise. See, Paul entertains the question of whether the law is contrary to the promises of God. Certainly not, he answers. The two are NOT in opposition. That is to say, then, that the law is complimentary to the promise. And as that which is of lesser glory, the law operates in a supportive role to the promise that God has made. The law is subordinate to the promise. The law serves the promise and it is not the other way around.

The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are not equal. Putting them side-by-side demonstrates the superiority and superior beauty and glory by far of God's promise-covenant with Abraham. To use the words of J. V. Fesko, "The Abrahamic covenant included the unchanging and irrevocable divine promise that comes directly from God through Christ and saves the people of God. The Mosaic covenant was revocable, mediated through angels and Moses, and powerless to save."

Why the law? The purpose of the law in regard to the promise is to display the superiority of God's promise to Abraham and to serve the purpose of the promise. How is this purpose accomplished? That is our next point.

Let's look at ...

III. The Purpose of the Law In Regard to Christ.

In short, the purpose of the law in regard to Christ was to point people to him. He is the ultimate one to whom the promise has been made.

How does the law accomplish this purpose? Well, we have already seen how the law increases our awareness of the multitude of our sins and that we have broken the law of the very one before whom we will stand as judge. In this way the law imprisons us so that we are at a loss to look to ourselves for any hope of escape. The prison is shut tightly. We are enclosed in a maximum security fortress. It is more foreboding than Alcatraz. Shackles wrap around our wrists and ankles. Doors and gates are barred. Left to ourselves we will never escape. And yet the burden grows heavier every day. The air thickens with guilt and shame being stored up so as to suffocate us, and yet we live with the weighty burden upon our backs. The law, like Pharaoh, holds us in its grip with a tyrannical hopelessness. We are led to long for and hope against hope for release by some miraculous means. Feeling the weight of shame and guilt, by God's grace we might in desperation

cry out along with the Apostle Paul, "wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Paul, back here in Galatians, uses the word guardian. The law was our GUARDIAN until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. The various translations use other terms including chaperone, guide, tutor, schoolmaster, and pedagogue. The Greek word refers to a person, typically a household slave, who was in charge of the household's children until they reached a designated age—usually somewhere in their teens. The guardian was like a nanny or a baby-sitter who would watch over the children and teach them morals and manners. When the appointed time came, the child was ready to be on his own; he or she was no longer under the guardian. Their usefulness and purpose was past.

So it is, says Paul, with the law: "It was our guardian until Christ came." That is, the law was in place to guide us to Christ. And now that he has come, the time of the law is over. It performed its function. It showed us that we were imprisoned, that we were captives, that we were hopeless in ourselves. It led us to cry out, "Who will save me from the body of this death?" It prepared us to see that the only answer to that cry is, "Jesus Christ."

Jesus is THE ONE, the only one, to keep the law of God. In perfect righteousness he died and suffered as though he had broken the law. He bore the curse that was due to us. So, who shall deliver me from the prison of my sin and inability? No one, except Jesus Christ. The reason for the law in regard to Christ is to show me the only one who has kept it. It is to put me in such a dark place of hopelessness due to my sin and transgression and shame and guilt, that I will gladly, firmly, and surely trust in Christ to be delivered! And as I do, the law has no hold on me any more. The law does not pertain to my justification any more. The promise made to Abraham has not been threatened or replaced or disputed by the law. The law has magnified the promise; it has pointed us to Christ; it has fulfilled its purpose. The time for the guardian is now over.

I am the oldest of three children. My parents did not go out very often when we were little, but when they did they'd have a babysitter stay with us. As a seven or eight-year-old, I actually liked having the babysitters come. My parents were active in a collegiate ministry at Clemson University and they would call one of the nice college girls to come and watch over us. But eventually the day came when my parents said to me, "Ross you are old enough and responsible enough that we don't need to call a babysitter any more." And they never did. Babysitters were no longer necessary.

As Paul says, "Now that faith in Christ has come we are no longer under a guardian." It is true in the history of salvation. Now that Christ has come, the Mosaic law is obsolete. Christ has fulfilled it all. We do not need a guardian any more. The purpose of the law of Moses is now past. So we surely do not need to go back to it. No more need for circumcision. No more need for feasts and temple priests. No more need for the temple. Jesus is our temple. The law had a purpose. Through the law we appreciate far better the need for Christ and the work of Christ. But Christ is all in all.

Conclusion

Now let's sum up what we have learned this morning about the purpose of the law. I am just going to quote J. V. Fesko: "the covenant that God made through Moses . . . was temporary, and it was made indirectly to Israel through the mediation of angels and Moses. Paul's chief point in contrasting the two covenants is to show that if salvation came through obedience to the law, then it would nullify and void the promise that God made to Abraham. However, the law was never intended to give life. Rather, it was added because of transgressions—it was added to reveal sin, thereby increasing the awareness

of guiltiness. This way, salvation was and always has been through the promise. The two covenants, however, were not opposed to one another but rather worked in tandem. The mosaic covenant was intended to drive Israel to Christ, the one in whom the covenant promise to Abraham is fulfilled.”

I will close with a few things for us to take away and employ in our thinking and living.

First, we need to be careful how we apply Old Testament scripture to our setting today. The scripture moves ever forward from creation to sin to promise to law to Christ and then to Christ’s return. While the promise endures, the law given through Moses was temporary. The Mosaic law is not binding on believers today, not the food laws, not circumcision, not the sacrifices, but also not the Sabbath, and not tithing. As a whole it is in the past. Now that does not mean that we should not observe the Lord’s day. It does not mean that there is no need to give to the Lord’s work at least 10% of what he has entrusted to us. It does not mean that we should feel free to violate the moral character reinforced by the law. It means we are not under a slavish taskmaster. Our guardian, so to speak, told us to do things that now we don’t have to any more. But moreover, we don’t do them because the law says to do them. We do what we do by the Spirit of God out of a heart into which God has written his law to obey out of faith and love for the one who has delivered us out of this body of death. Thanks be to God! For example, if we can give more than a tithe why not! So let’s be careful to understand the Bible biblically.

Second, we need to realize that rules do not make people better. Rules do not reform the heart. Rules expose what is in the heart. If you do not like something, a rule can’t make you like it. Sinful hearts despise righteousness and rules can’t change your inner desires. At Thanksgiving, I made a carrot souffle. It turns out a lot like sweet potatoes. Well, Titus had some on his plate, but he wasn’t eating it. We didn’t make him, but I encouraged him just to lick it. He was slow to admit it, but eventually he decided to admit that it was pretty good. So much so that he went to Rebekah’s plate and got hers. A rule didn’t change him, but his inner disposition changed, and then he liked what he was convinced he wouldn’t.

Rules and laws are necessary in the world. But they do not change hearts. Tom Schreiner shares this analogy: If it has bars, it can keep a lion from eating the lamb, but it can’t prevent the lion from wanting to eat the lamb. Rules and laws can function like a cage, but they cannot change a heart. Only God can do that. And that must be the main thing we want for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors. So don’t just rejoice when and because people follow the rules. Rejoice when they love Jesus Christ and trust in him because he is sweet to their taste.

Finally, although the law does not apply to Christians, it is a very helpful tool for exposing the nature of sinners. Use it liberally. Bring God’s law to the attention of the world so they will realize why Jesus came. The law does not reform hearts but it informs understanding to grasp that humans are wicked sinners. It is that understanding that is needed so that by grace they might be induced to realize, “wretched man that I am!” Then by grace they might be moved to ask, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And finally by grace, they might be brought to joyfully exclaim, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Why the law? Because of transgressions—to show us our guilt and reveal our need that only Christ can meet according to the promise that God made to Abraham so that we may be justified before God in Christ alone through faith alone.

Please listen. Look at the law of God. It tells you never to lie. It tells you never to murder even with your thoughts. It tells you never to commit adultery even with your thoughts. It tells you never to covet, never to dishonor parents, never to take the name of God in vain, never to worship anything but God as he is. Do you see this morning that all the law can do is imprison you in your sin and shame? If you are not looking to Jesus in faith, would you not accept his pardon today? Cast yourself on Him. Believe in him; trust in him. He will save you now.