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### **Galatians 3:15-25**

#### **The Promise, the Law, and Christ**

This last January, I started a new Bible reading plan to help me read through the entire Bible in a year. It's a simple plan: you start off at the beginning of the Old Testament (Genesis) and the beginning of the New Testament (Matthew), reading two or three chapters from the Old and one from the New every day until you work your way through the whole Bible. I'm not unique at all in this; I know many of you have done or are doing the same kind of thing, or some other similar plan. If you've ever started reading through the Bible like this before, then we've all probably had the same kind of experience: you start off strong, reading about Creation and the Fall, Noah's ark, Abraham, then GOD's deliverance of Israel in the Exodus. But then, you come to Mount Sinai and what can feel like an endless list of laws. In fact, the Law of Moses takes up the vast majority of *four of the first five books of the Bible*. And so, as you're trying to be faithful in your Bible reading, and you're trekking along, you finally come to the Law passages and you might begin to grow weary in your travels there, and might be tempted to give up your Bible reading plan; indeed, many travelers have gotten lost in the woods of Leviticus and were never seen again.

Now, we know that all of the Bible is God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. Every bit of the Bible - even Exodus through Deuteronomy - is GOD's true, sufficient, and authority Word. And that means *we need all of it*; we need to read and understand and meditate upon every bit of the Bible. And so you dutifully keep trekking through the books of the Law. But while many of us may know that the Law books are God's true and authoritative Word for us, and we need to read it, *we might not know why we need it or how to read it*. So as you read through the Law books, you might start to wonder, "What in the world am I supposed to do with these books and passages of the Bible, as a Christian?" Why did God give the Law? Why do I need to read it? And how does it apply to my life today?"

As we've gone through the book of Galatians over the past couple of months, we've seen Paul argue over and over again that we, as Christians, *are not under the Law of Moses*. In fact, we saw Paul argue very strongly last week that *no one is justified or made righteous* through the Law; no one receives life, righteousness, blessing, or salvation through obeying God's Law;

instead, all who rely on works of the law get sin, death, and the curse of God's wrath and judgment. The blessings of life, righteousness, and salvation come not through the law but through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ alone!

So you might be wondering, "If that's true, then what's the purpose of the law?"

Thankfully, Paul now turns to answer that questions for us in our passage today, Gal. 3:15-25. So that's my goal for this sermon: for us to walk through this passage and understand why the Law was given, why it's still God's Word for us in our Bible's today, and how we're supposed to read, understand, and apply it as Christians.

So first off, we need to see the relationship between the covenant of Abraham and the Law Covenant of Moses:

### **I. The Law of Moses was Always Secondary, God's Promise of Grace Through Faith was Always Primary (3:15-18)**

Paul has just argued that the blessing of Abraham - the blessing of righteousness and eternal life with God - comes through faith in the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The blessing doesn't come through our own works and obedience - rather, relying on the works of the law only brings more sin, death, and even the curse of GOD's judgment. And part of Paul's argument here is that this was *always the case*, even in the Old Testament. God's Covenant with Israel through moses was based on works, based on obeying the Law. But long before the Law came, God made a covenant with Abraham; and this covenant was not based on works, but it was based on *God's promise*; not a covenant of works but of grace; not conditional on Abraham's obedience, but purely conditional upon GOD's faithfulness to keep His promise.

And for this to be true, it means that the Law of Moses didn't change or negate God's promise of grace in His covenant with Abraham. Paul explains this with an illustration in v. 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." In other words, he's saying: think about the covenants or vows that humans make with each other; when two people enter into an agreement and give their word, they expect each other to keep it. If you're offered a job with a salary of \$60,000 a year, and you accept it and sign a contract, then both you and your employer are entering into a relationship that is outlined by the agreements of that contract; this is very similar to the idea behind a covenant. Now, let's you accept that job for \$60,000 a year, but your boss only pays you \$20,000. YOu go into his office, demanding to receive the rest of your salary, and may even

show him your contract. And imagine he said, “Well, I know we agreed to that, but a few days after you accepted the job, I changed my mind and decided to make it \$20,000 instead.” We all know: he can’t do that! That’s not the way contracts work! And it’s not the way covenants worked in the ancient world, either. THE basic principle is the same: when we enter into an agreement with someone, we expect the other person to keep their word. We expect them to keep their promise, and even make them legally liable to keep it.

Paul’s point is: if we expect this of *human agreements*, then how much more so can we trust a promise from God? God cannot lie; His Word cannot fail! God will always keep His promises! Paul makes the point explicit in v.17: “This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward,” that is, after God’s covenant with Abraham, “does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.” Paul’s using legal language here, but the point is clear: when God made a covenant with Abraham, he made a promise; it wasn’t conditional on Abraham obeying, it was just based on God’s promise to bless Him, which meant all Abraham had to do was believe God and trust that God would keep His promise. And this means that the later covenant, the covenant of Moses, *doesn’t all of the sudden change or nullify GOD’s previous promise!* God’s promise to God’s people, through Abraham, still stands: God’s blessing would come to all nations *through the offspring of Abraham*; righteousness and life would come through faith in God’s promise, like it did for Abraham, not through the works of the Law. Otherwise, God would be breaking His promise! As Paul concludes in v. 18: “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by a promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.”

In other words, Paul is arguing for the primacy and superiority of the Abrahamic covenant (a covenant of grace) over the MOsaic Covenant (a covenant of works). In fact, I think this is why Paul comments in verses 19-20 saying that the Law was “put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.” Let me just say, right off the bat, that these verses are really difficult to interpret; I’m not 100% sure what they mean and how they fit into the argument here. I could be wrong, but I *think* the point is this: the Law of MOses had to be mediated; It came from God *through angels* to Moses, then *through Moses* to the people of God. But the covenant of Abraham was different, where God made it directly with Abraham. Therefore, it’s further evidence that GOD’s covenant to Abraham is superior to the Law.

And this is why that's important: hundreds of years before the Law of Moses came, God made a covenant with Abraham that was based purely on God's promise. And what did God promise to Abraham? Paul tells us in v.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." Paul is referencing back to Genesis chapters 12 through 22 where God repeatedly promises Abraham that his covenant promise is for him *and* for Abraham's offspring. Now, your Bible may not have an exact scripture quotation cited here, but that's because there are many verses that it could be quoting; but just for example, listen to Gen. 17:8, where God says to Abraham, "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." Now, the word "offspring" can be either plural or singular; this is true in English, and was also true in Greek and Hebrew. So with a play on words here, Paul tells us that, while in one sense Abraham's promise was for his "many" offspring, it was also, all along, talking specifically about a *singular, specific offspring*. And we see this clearly in the book of Genesis.

I teach the adult Sunday School class here, and this semester we've been studying the storyline of the entire Bible, seeing how it all fits together. I've been teaching that we can summarize the whole story as "Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation." In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God create all things; He creates humanity in His image, to be God's people, living in God's place, obeying God's commands. But then, in Genesis 3, we see the Fall - Adam and Eve disobeyed, breaking God's covenant, no longer God's people, and kicked out of God's place - the Garden of Eden, paradise, heaven on Earth. But the story didn't end there: even in Genesis 3, in verse 15, God gave a promise of a coming savior, who would redeem sinful humanity, by crushing the serpent - Satan. God promised this savior would be one of Adam and Eve's *offspring*. Now, all of Adam and Eve's offspring (the entire human race) has been affected by sin, so that we all sin, are God's enemies, and deserve God's judgment! This means *all of their offspring*, all of humanity, need to be redeemed! But this redemption would come through *one offspring in particular*. So we follow the story of Genesis, and then God promises Abraham that he would bless *all of the nations and families of the earth*, all of Adam and Eve's offspring, *through Abraham's offspring!* The point is clear: one of Abraham's offspring would be the same savior promised to Adam and Eve: the Messiah would come through Abraham and make salvation possible for the peoples of the Earth!

Paul connects the dots here for us: that promised offspring, that promised Messiah, is *Jesus Christ our Lord!* Even in Genesis, God was prophetically talking about Jesus. And this means that when God made these promises to Abraham “and to his offspring,” the promise was made *to Jesus Christ*. Jesus is the promised offspring. Jesus is the promised savior for all the world! And the “promised land” promised to Abraham, the land Paul calls the promised “inheritance” of v.18, doesn’t just refer to piece of land in the Middle East: it refers to the entire world, as Rom. 4:13 makes clear, as 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.” In other words, the promise to Abraham is so important because it wasn’t talking about Israel getting to live on a piece of land forever - it’s talking about Jesus Christ inheriting all the world, so that whoever believes in Him gets to share in this inheritance as the true sons of Abraham! In other words: the promised inheritance is *our eternal salvation*, the inheritance of eternal life in Christ as this world is recreated into a new Garden of Eden!

Jesus is a blessing to all nations because Jesus came and lived the perfectly righteous you and I have failed to live; he died on the cross, bearing GOD’s judgment against our sin, just as God’s law demands; and He rose again on the third day, crushin sin, Satan, and even death beneath His feet, so that all who repent and believe in Jesus Christ will be forgiven, declared righteous before God, and blessed to live forever as God’s people in GOD’s place: the New Heavens and New Earth, a new Garden of Eden, paradise, Heaven on Earth!

If you’re trusting in Christ alone this morning, then God has promised this glorious inheritance of eternal life with Him to you, and it is yours *simply because God has promised it!* It’s based on His grace, not our works!

And if you’re not a Christian this morning, this inheritance can be yours, too! It’s not about what you’ve done or haven’t done - it’s simply about what Christ has done for you! Simply believe in God’s promise of grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

The promised blessing, the promised inheritance, is *nothing less than eternal salvation!* God’s blessing, the inheritance of the New Creation, righteousness, eternal life - we could never earn these by our own works, these could never come through the law. They only come through resting in the promises of God!

So then, if that’s true - then why did God give the Law? That’s where Paul turns next...

## **II. The Law of Moses Exposes Sinfulness and Shows our Need for Christ (3:19-22)**

Paul asks the obvious question in v.19, “Why then the law?” Paul gives two answers to the role of the law in vv.19-21.

The first answer is in verse 19: “It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise has been made.” I think Paul is saying the same thing here as he does in Rom. 5:20: “Now the law came in to increase the trespass.” The purpose of the law is to show us just how holy God is and just how sinful we are. The law shows us that we are not righteous, and we could never be righteous before God by our own works. The Law shows us that none of us that we are all sinners who deserve God’s wrath and curse; we deserve death, even eternal death in Hell. The Law shows us that we are good enough to stand before God in judgment, no one is, and no one ever can be. God gave the Law of Moses to make it really clear that *even we’re told what to do*, we still can’t do it; the law shows us that we are unrighteous in ourselves, unclean, unholy, and unable to earn GOD’s blessing. God gave the Law of Moses to show our sinfulness and increase our trespasses - to make clear that we are all guilty before God because of our sin.

Secondly, the law shows us our need for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We see this in verses 21-22: “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. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” The law could never bring life and righteousness; the law was never able to save anyone because *we were never able to keep it*. The whole point of the law is to show the futility of works-based righteousness, and show us our need for the grace that comes through faith in God’s promise: the promise of the gospel of Christ Jesus! This is why Paul says that the Law isn’t contrary to God’s promise to Abraham; it doesn’t work *against* the promise of grace, but actually works *for it!* The Law is complementary because it shows us that *our only hope if God’s grace*; we don’t need a covenant based on our works, we need a covenant based on the unfailing promise of God. Therefore, the whole purpose of that Law, all long, was to prophetically point us to Jesus Christ so that we would see that our only hope of salvation is by grace, not works, through faith in Christ, not the Law!

And this leads us to our final point:

### **III. The Law of Moses Has Been Fulfilled and Replaced In Christ (3:23-25)**

The Law of Moses was never intended to be the answer; it was always intended to be temporary. THE Law of Moses served an important, but temporary purpose in God's unfolding plan of redemption in the Old Testament. Paul further explains this role in verses 23-24: "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." Paul compares the law's role for ISrael in two ways here: the first is like saying they were *imprisoned*, "held captive," by the law. This is just another way of stating our last point: the law showed our sinfulness and need for righteousness to come *outside of our obedience to the law*, through faith in Jesus Christ. But Paul uses a second analogy here: he compares the law's role in scripture to the role of a "guardian" or "tutor" in the life of a child.

Now, neither of those English words fully captures the analogy Paul is drawing here, since he's referencing a role that we don't really have in our modern culture. But basically, this would have been someone in Greco-Roman culture who was responsible for overseeing a boy's education, but also for taking care of him while he was away at school - getting what he needed, taking care of his meals, keeping him safe, etc. And Paul says this is how the Law functioned for Israel. Now, how is that the case? It's because the Law was always meant to *preserve Israel*, until Christ came, but also for the purpose of *teaching Israel* about Christ!

The Law was always meant to prophetically point us to Jesus Christ, so that God's people would believe in Him and be saved! The whole point all along was that righteousness and eternal life don't come through the law or our own works and performance or what we do - it comes through faith in what Jesus Christ has done for us! The Law prophetically pointed to Christ. Therefore, when Christ came, he *fulfilled the Law*. He fulfilled the Law by actually obeying it and being perfectly righteous - Jesus alone received the blessings of the Law! He alone perfectly fulfilled the Law's demands! And he did this for you and me! When we trust in Christ, *His righteousness is credited to our account!*

And this means that since Christ has come and fulfilled the law in our place, *we are no longer under the Law anymore!* We see this in verse 25: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian." Now that Christ has come, we're no longer back in grade school - adult maturity has arrived! But this doesn't mean the law was bad, or that it was pointless; it means the law served its purpose and has been fulfilled in Christ! This means Christ has *fulfilled and repudiated the Law!* It's no longer in effect. We're free from the law! But this doesn't mean

we're now "lawless" - we're not under the law, but we are *in Christ*. We're no longer under the law of Moses, but we are in the Law of Christ! Paul is going to explain this more through the rest of Galatians; I'm actually that phrase, "the law of Christ," from Gal. 6:2. But I think it's important for us to go ahead and understand the argument Paul is making here: Christ has come, fulfilled the Law, ended the law, and *replace the Law*. This has *huge implications* for how we live as Christians, relate to the Law, and apply it to our lives today.

### **Application: How do we Read and Interpret the Law as Christians?**

So let's return to where we began: if we're not under the Law of Moses, then why do we need to read and understand it today, as Christians? How we interpret the Law of Moses to our lives as Christians, if we're not under it? Let me just give three applications from this text that you can use when you're reading the Law passages of the Old Testament: we see the Law in three different ways: it's purpose before Christ came, as Law-Covenant; it's prophetic fulfillment in Christ, as prophecy; and it's re-application to us in the Law of Christ, as wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

First off, we recognize *The Law of Moses as a Law Covenant that we are not under*. It served a temporary purpose in the Bible's storyline, and now that Christ has come, we are not under the Law of Moses at all. We're not bound by the Ten Commandments. We're not bound by circumcision, the temple, sacrificial system, or any of the laws. Therefore, we don't have to be circumcised or follow kosher food laws or avoid tattoos or have railings on our roof because we're not under that Law.

Secondly, *read the Law as Prophecy that points to and is fulfilled in Christ*. As you're reading the Law, see how it shows you sinfulness and our inability to be righteous; see how it emphasizes God's holiness and our uncleanness and our need for atonement for our sin. And recognize that the Law *prophetically points to Christ*. It shows us our need for Jesus by pointing us *to* Jesus. Now, it does this in different ways: the sacrifices we see point to Jesus, the true sacrifice for our sins, once and for all. The priests that fail point us to Jesus, the true and better High priest. The moral commands and laws of justice and rules about cleanness all show us our need for perfect righteousness - and Jesus is the only one who fulfilled God's demands of righteousness. The Law shows us our need for Christ and how Christ has brought us the salvation we need!

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<sup>1</sup> These categories for interpreting the Law come from Brian Rosner, *Paul and the Law*.



And third, we need to remember that *the Law has been replaced by the law of Christ*. We are not under the Law of Moses, but under the Law of Christ. Christ has fulfilled the Law for us. And therefore, we reinterpret the Law *through Christ*. This means that we fulfill the purpose of the Law by becoming more like Jesus Christ. The point of the Law, all along, was to show us that only Jesus Christ meets God's demands on perfect righteousness in the world. The Law gives us wisdom principles that can be applied in light of Christ. The Law says, "Don't murder, don't steal, don't commit adultery." The Law of Christ agrees, but not because we're under Moses, but because those things aren't loving. SO the Law of Christ goes further: don't even be angry or have hate in your heart towards others; don't be jealous about what others have but be content with what you have; don't even think about another person with lust in your heart.

Therefore, we fulfill and re-apply the law by looking to Christ, and becoming more like Him! And Christ himself taught us that the Law can be summed up with two commands: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love other people as yourself! This is what the Law of Christ demands of us! Why? *Because this is what Christ has shown us*. We love God because He first love us, even by God the Son taking on flesh and *dying on the cross for our sins!* And if He loved us this way, how can we not love Him? How can we not love others? In other words: we don't obey *to be saved*, but we obey *because we have been saved!* So let us look to Jesus Christ in faith, and let us show we truly believe by *becoming more like Christ*, loving God and each other more and more like Christ does, in all that we do!

But let us make it *very clear*: our salvation *is not* based on our obedience, or even based on how loving or faithful we are! Our salvation is based *on the promise of God alone!* Our salvation is *by grace through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ*, the promised offspring of Abraham! We are blessed to receive the inheritance of eternal life in the New Creation not because of what we do, but purely because Jesus lived the perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again on that third day, bringing true life and righteousness and salvation to all who believe in Him!

Therefore, it is so fitting that we respond to this glorious gospel this morning by coming to the Lord's Table and proclaiming that we are trusting in what Christ has done, and believe He is coming again to usher in our promised inheritance! If you're a baptized believer in good

standing with a gospel preaching church, I invite you to come to the table with us in just a few moments.

But if you're not a Christian this morning, we ask that you just stay seated during this time, because then there's a *different* way for you to respond: turn and believe in this gospel of Jesus Christ, and then make your faith public by being baptized in the church! If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you; please find me as soon as the service is over.

Let us have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the table.