

## **Law Disciplines - Jesus Gives Life**

### **Galatians 3:19-29**

#### **Introduction**

The questions in 3:19 and 21 should be seen as objections Paul's opponents had to his previous statements. This section makes a strong argument, showing the superiority of the event of the cross over the Law from a number of different perspectives.

#### **The Law Was Added Because of Transgressions: 3:19a**

The fact that the Law was added *after* the promise was given to Abraham makes it subordinate to the promise and suggests that it was never to be considered a part of God's final redemptive activity.

Scholars recognize the difficulty of determining the meaning of this phrase and offer multiple possibilities. The meaning that seems most likely interprets this phrase to mean that the law brought about (Longnecker, pg. 138) "a consciousness of sin in sin-hardened humanity" (Rom. 3:20). This image fits what will be said later in the metaphor of a guardian. In his discussion of this verse, Longnecker goes on to point out that the main thrust is that law addressed transgressions and not righteousness.

#### **The Law Was Temporary: 3:19b**

The law's purpose would remain until the "Seed" arrived. As in 3:16, the seed is Christ. The promise would remain in effect before, during, and after the law. It was permanent. The law was always intended to be temporary.

Paul's view would have been in opposition to contemporary Judaism. Longnecker (pg. 139) refers to many Jewish sources to show this view. Josephus referred to the law as 'immortal.' Wisdom of Solomon 18:4 refers to the law as "imperishable light." Philo says the law is as changeless as long as the sun, moon, heavens, and earth exists.

The prophets often rebuked the people even though they were going through the mechanics of the law. They were offering their sacrifices and doing the temple ritual,

but their hearts were not in it. The people were not fulfilling the spirit of the law. Jesus' teaching (as seen in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:17) and life fulfilled the spirit of the law in a way that no one else can. We fulfill the spirit of the law through our union with Jesus.

### **The Law Was Ordained through Angels by a Mediator: 3:19c-20**

The Masoretic Text of the OT in Exodus 19 does not speak of angels as being involved in the giving of the law. Later rabbinic thought understood the chariotry of God in Psalm 68:17 as a large number of angels who accompanied God at Sinai. This thought was prominent in the days of Paul (Acts 7:38, 53; Heb 2:2).

Verse 20 is a fairly obscure statement. The idea of the oneness of God fits well with the one seed of 3:16 and the one people of 3:28. Paul appears to be making a contrast between the law that was given through two mediators (angels and Moses) and the promise that came directly from the God. The promise that came directly from God without mediation is superior to the one that was mediated through others. Jesus is the word of God who was sent directly by God.

### **Law Is a Prison: 3:21-25**

In verse 21 Paul anticipates the objection of his opponents. Is law against the promises of God? Law would be in opposition to the promise if law had been intended to bring life, but giving life was not its purpose. Law imprisons all things under the power of sin. It discloses the truth of the sinfulness of both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 3:9). Through law we come to realize that we cannot save ourselves. When it is understood that our situation is hopeless unless God acts, it opens the door for God's divine redemption to be embraced.

Verse 22 is another place where Paul first spoke of the faithfulness of Jesus ("through or out of faithful Jesus Christ"). The word "in" is not in the text. Paul then spoke of a disciple's faith at the end ("those who believe"). As Hayes (pg. 269) says, "The long-awaited promise is brought to fulfillment through 'Christ's trustful obedience to God in the giving up of his own life for ours.'"

The phrases “faith came” (v. 23a), “faith would be revealed” (v. 23b) and “faith has come” (v. 25) are all parallel to the phrase “until Christ came” in verse 24. These phrases speak of Jesus, the faithful one who came and who was revealed to be God’s fulfillment of the promise. The law kept people locked up until God’s plan for redemption (Jesus) came. Consider the words of Hayes (pg. 275).

We must beware of becoming infatuated with faith as an aspect of our own subjectivity or religious experience. Protestant preaching has often fallen into the trap of treating faith as a new kind of ‘work,’ a human achievement that somehow merits God’s approval. On such a distortion, the judgment of William Law is apt: ‘Suppose one man to rely on his own faith and another to rely on his own works, then the faith of the one and the works of the other are equally the same worthless filthy rags.’ A careful reading of Gal 3:6-29 provides the corrective for this error. Paul is not interested here in a phenomenological description of faith as a human disposition. Instead, he is interested in telling the story of how faith ‘came,’ breaking into the prison of human experience to set us free (3:23-25). Faith is something ‘revealed’ to us as God’s deed; it is not merely the illumination of a new human possibility.

Law is called our *paidagogos* (v. 24). This is not a teacher in the sense we think of one. This person was a slave who supervised and protected the owner’s children. The slave’s tasks included things like walking them to and from school and seeing that they behaved properly. When the child became an adult, the slave’s role ceased. Law confined, guarded, and disciplined Israel. It was not God’s ultimate plan for redemption. Now that Jesus has come, the law’s function is no longer needed. Many believe the NIV is misleading in verse 24. The law did not lead us to Christ. Again from Hayes (pg. 270), “According to Paul, we did not make our way, under the tutelage of the Law, progressively to Christ; instead, Christ came to us. In no other way could we have been released from our confinement.” The NRSV “our disciplinarian” is more accurate.

The context of 23-26 seems to dictate that the phrases “might be justified by faith” (v. 24b) and “through faith” (26b) continue to be speaking of Jesus, as did the other faith phrases already mentioned. We are made covenant partners (justified) as a result of the faithfulness of Jesus. Before faith (Jesus) came, we were imprisoned until faith (Jesus) came so that we might be justified by faith (Jesus’ faithfulness), and now we are all children of God through faith (faithful Jesus). This is all about God’s action in

Christ as the place where trust should be given rather than trusting in law (identity markers).

### **Being Abraham's Offspring Is Found in Christ: 3:26-29**

Becoming children of God is not found in circumcision or any other religious observance. It is found in Christ. A major point here is that "all" who are in Christ are children of God. The way into that relationship with Christ is the same as that of Abraham. It is through faith.

Earlier Paul referred the Galatians back to their experience with the Spirit (3:1ff). Here, he referred them back to their baptismal experience. Baptism is seen as a clothing or union with Christ. In the OT (Psalm 132:9,16), priests are spoken of as being clothed with "righteousness" and "salvation." To be clothed with something is to take on the character of that thing. In the early years of the church, people were often baptized naked and then given a new robe, signifying their new life in Christ. All Galatians who had been baptized had taken on a new life that was identified with the life of Christ. Jews, who had become Christians, were no longer to be identified by circumcision or other identity markers. Gentiles who had become Christians were certainly not to get their identity by the observance of "works of law." The true identity of both came from their union with Christ. "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me." There are therefore, no markers that separate the children of God. Hayes' comments on baptism are worth consideration.

Someone might object that baptism is simply one more religious ritual and that to elevate this one above all other identity-defining practices is just one more manifestation of religious imperialism. Of course, human sinfulness can distort even baptism into a new basis for perverse pride and division, as Paul learned all too well in his dealings with the church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:10-17). The point is, however, that Paul sees baptism not as an end in itself, but as a signifier of our union with Christ. Through faith." (pg. 274).

Paul was very specific as to the scope of what "all" meant by addressing the three main social distinctions in the Roman world. In Christ there are no ethnic, social, or gender distinctions. Being mainly directed toward the teaching of the Jewish Christian opponents, Paul may have been responding to the three blessings that appear

in the Jewish morning prayers. The following comes from Longnecker (pg. 157).  
“Blessed be He (God) that He did not make me a Gentile; blessed be He that He did not make me a boor (ignorant peasant or slave); blessed be He that He did not make me a woman.” Greeks had a similar expression, which stated gratitude, “that I was born a human being and not a beast, next, a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian.”

In chapter 3, Paul talked about the curse of the law. Not only were there curses as spoken of in Deuteronomy 27, there were curses that went back to the beginning of Genesis. Separation and distinction between male and female was a curse that came about as a result of sin (Gen. 3). The curse of social distinctions came about at the incident of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:9). Christ came to remove these curses and to place everything back to the way it was in the garden before sin cursed the world. The removal of gender distinctions can also be seen in Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees in Matthew 12:25. In the fulfillment of the Messianic age there will be no marriage for we will be like angels. The question we have to deal with in churches today is in what ways is this to be lived out in our lives now (as much as we can) and in what ways is it only going to be true when Jesus returns. Scholars talk about the already/not yet aspect of the Messianic age. We are already as pure as new fallen snow from God’s perspective as a result of our union with the faithful Christ and yet we still sin. We are no longer of this world yet we will not fully be rescued from the evil things of this world until Jesus returns. We are not yet fully in the new Messianic age but we are to live as if we are.

Those who had been brought into union with Christ through baptism belonged to Christ. That relationship was established before the opponents from Jerusalem taught the Galatians to adhere to Jewish “works of law” as the way to partake of God’s promises. Being an heir of the promise comes through union with the one true offspring of Abraham and not through law. Jesus was the only offspring who was completely faithful to the God of the promises.

## **Conclusion**

Law had its purpose, but giving life was not its purpose. Law and the guilt of life had different purposes in God’s redemptive plan. Therefore there is no competition

between law and promise. Law exposed the depth of the human condition, weak and under the power of sin, and kept people under the reality of a curse (3:13). Law was an imprisoning disciplinarian from which we should desire to be freed. Law's curse and the imprisoning power of sin brought through law leaves humanity with only one life giving option, embrace the rectifying covenant relationship with God that is found in Christ. Flee from seeking righteousness through any religious identity markers. In Christ all distinctions created by humanity that separate people has been torn down.

**Points to Be Made:**

1. The law was a strict disciplinarian that exposed our weakness and kept a curse hanging over our heads. It could not and does not give life.
2. Life is not found in identity markers that separate people.
3. Life and righteousness (covenant relationship) is found in Christ's faithful death, God's fulfillment of the promise.
4. Life in Christ tears down all distinctions that people use to divide us and to make us feel greater or lesser than the other.