

What Purpose Then Does The Law Serve?

Text: Gal 3:15-22

Suggested Hymns:

822, 344, 318, 343, 270

1) Not to disannul the promises of the Gospel

2) But rather to prepare man for the reception of the

Gospel promises

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Galatians 3:15–22, ¹⁵ *Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man’s covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.*

¹⁶ *Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ.* ¹⁷ *And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect.* ¹⁸ *For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.*

¹⁹ *What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.* ²⁰ *Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one.* ²¹ *Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.* ²² *But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

St. Paul asks two questions in this Epistle. The one is, ²¹ *Is the law then against the promises of God?* He answers *Certainly not!*

²¹ *Is the law then against the promises of God?* This question will force itself on every careful reader of the Bible, and as long as a person has not been

enlightened with the Spirit of God so that he accepts the Bible as the infallible Word of God, he will not answer with St. Paul in the negative and say, ***Certainly not!***

Rather he will answer in the affirmative and say: “*The Law is certainly against the promises of God.*” He will find the Bible teeming with discrepancies as long as he will not bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

One of the most glaring contradictions he will find is in the two chief doctrines of the Bible, the Law and the Gospel. Do not these two doctrines stand in direct opposition to each other? Does not the Law point out a certain way to heaven, and does not the Gospel point out an altogether different way?

Does not the Law say: *You must keep the commandments of God and do His will, and you shall live*, and does not the Gospel say: *You must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall obtain eternal life*?

Did not Christ say to the young man who spoke of love to God and the neighbour: “***Do this and you will live.***”¹ And did not Paul and Silas say to the keeper of the prison at Philippi: “***Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved***”?² Are these not two different ways to heaven, the one by deed (i.e. works), the other by faith? Does not the one exclude the other? If one of these ways is right, must not the other be false?

As long, therefore, as you follow the dictates of human reason and place human reason above the divine Word, and as long as you have not been enlightened on this question by the Spirit of God, you will find a glaring contradiction here, and you will say that the Law and the Gospel are two things which can never be made to harmonise.

There is another question in our text, and the consideration of this second question will help us to perceive that, although the Law and the Gospel are two opposing doctrines, they are in perfect harmony, and the Law is not against the promises of God.

This second question is, ¹⁹ ***What purpose then does the law serve?*** This is our theme for today. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Law Does Not Disannul The Promises Of The Gospel

The intention of the Law is not to disannul, or to set aside, the promises of the Gospel. The first Gospel promise was given to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden after they had fallen into sin, when God said to the serpent that the woman's *Seed shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.*"³ This was the first promise of the Saviour to redeem fallen man.

Two thousand years later God repeated this promise to Abraham, saying to him, "*In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"⁴

This promise to Abraham was the covenant of which St Paul speaks in our text when he says, "¹⁵*Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it.*

¹⁶*Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ.*
¹⁷*And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect."*

In these words the Apostle brings out two points to show that the Law does not disannul the Gospel promises. He calls attention to two indisputable facts. The first fact is, that the Gospel is God's testament which He has made to be forever His immutable will which can never be altered.

The second fact is, that God revealed the Law from Mount Sinai a long time after He had revealed His covenant to Abraham. It was four hundred and thirty years later that He gave the Law through Moses.

The Apostle is saying, *How can you think that by the revelation of the Law, which in the course of time God solemnly proclaimed from Mount Sinai, that He meant to disannul, to set aside, to repeal, to do away with those precious Gospel promises which He had given to men from the beginning of the world?*

Has not God declared that these Gospel promises are His final testament, His unchangeable will by which He bequeaths the blessing through the promised Saviour to all the families of the earth?

How are things done in every-day life? Is a testament or will ever set aside for the sake of certain sayings which the testator uttered after he had made his will?

Must not his heirs abide by the written will and testament, and divide among themselves the inheritance according to the directions which have been laid down in the document?

The Law therefore which God gave from Mount Sinai, although it does point out an altogether different way to eternal life than the Gospel, cannot do away with the Gospel promises. These are the certified testament, the immutable will of God, and not the Law of God, which has its own special purpose, but the Gospel is to be our guide to heaven.

O how important for us all is this teaching of the Apostle, that the Law does not disannul the Gospel promises! When you have fallen into sin, my friends, the Law will approach you. It will tell you, "***The soul who sins shall die.***"⁵ It will inform you that there is no hope for you, that you are lost and condemned because you have sinned against God. It will make you sink into utter despair because of your sins.

But here the holy Apostle informs you that not the Law, but the Gospel is God's testament and immutable will, and that not by the Law, but by the Gospel He will bring you into eternal life.

It is not God's will that you should be forever lost and condemned on account of your manifold sins, but it is His good and gracious will that through the Gospel you should be saved.

Did not God swear and say in Ezekiel 33:11, ¹¹ ***Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live?'***

Did He not make it known in the Scripture that He ***desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,***⁶ and that He is ***not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance?***⁷

Did not the Son of God Himself say in John 3:16, ¹⁶ ***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life?***

Do not let the Law of God lead you into despair, then, on account of your sins. Do not despair, and even if your sins should be ever so great, and if there be ever so many of them flee to the Gospel!

The Gospel is the eternal testament of your God. It is His immutable will, which nothing in heaven or on earth can change. In the Gospel you will find comfort against sin.

The Gospel tells you in Luke 15:2 that Jesus *receives sinners*. It tells you that the eternal Son of God bled and died on the cross, and that He has thereby made perfect atonement for all your transgressions.

It tells you that, if you believe in your merciful Saviour, you shall have the full forgiveness of all your sins, the forgiveness which is there and continually extended to you by the Gospel; for as we read in 1 John 1:7, *the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin*.

Finally, Jesus says in John 6:40, ⁴⁰ *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day*.

2. The Purpose Of The Law Is To Prepare Man For The Reception Of The Gospel Promises.

And now, having shown you that the intention of the Law is not to disannul the Gospel promises, let me show you, in the second place, what purpose the Law serves, namely, to prepare men for the reception of the Gospel.

By nature, my friends, we are in such a forlorn state and condition that the Gospel is preached to us in vain. By nature we simply do not care, even if we know and feel that we are sinners. Our sins cause us no trouble to speak of.

We try to persuade ourselves that in many respects we are better than others, and that we do good, to the best of our ability, so that we can reasonably expect to be received into heaven. By nature we do not feel as though we were in need of a Saviour, and therefore the Gospel, which tells of the Saviour, is proclaimed to us in vain.

If the Gospel is to be of any benefit to us, our hearts must first be prepared for its reception, and that is done by the Law of God. ¹⁹ *What purpose then does*

the law serve? The Apostle answers, “It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.”

He is saying, not because of salvation did God add the Law to the Gospel, not that we should obtain salvation through the Law, but because of transgressions, namely, that we should see our transgressions and know and realise that we are damnable sinners. Remember what you learnt in Confirmation, the Law is a mirror which shows us our sins.

He adds, “*And it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.* ²⁰*Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one.*” The Apostle is saying that the Israelites needed a mediator when God gave them the Law. They could not deal with God directly, neither would God deal directly with them.

Moses had to stand between them and be a mediator for God and for the people. Now this plainly shows that the Israelites were not and could not be saved by the Law. The Law did not bring them nearer to God, but rather frightened them away from God.

Finally, Paul says, ²¹*Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.* ²²*But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*

The Law, then, is not against the promises of the Gospel because it serves for an altogether different purpose than the Gospel. The purpose of the Gospel is to bring man into eternal life, and the Gospel has the power to give life; for the Gospel of Christ *is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.*⁸

But the Law has no such power; it cannot give life, and the purpose of the Law is to conclude that all people are under sin, to bring sin home to them, to show them how wretched and miserable they are, and thus to prepare their hearts that they should despair of themselves and long and yearn for a Saviour to redeem them from the curse which is resting upon them.

Do not mistake the purpose and power of the Law, then, my friends! Do not think that by keeping the Ten Commandments of the Law you can enter to

heaven. You cannot keep them as they should be kept. Since the fall natural man cannot keep the Law of God at all, and the regenerate keep it but imperfectly.

If, therefore, by keeping the Law you attempt to reach eternal life, you will fail. It is true that God binds you to His Law, and that you are required to fulfil every commandment. The Law serves as a Mirror, Guide (or Rule), and a Curb.

The main purpose of the Law is to show you that you are a miserable sinner; to convince you that, in truth, you have not kept a single commandment as it should be kept, from fear and love to God, letter and spirit. The purpose of the Law is to deprive you of your righteousnesses, and to show you that before God they are as filthy rags.⁹

The purpose of the Law is to disclose to you the misery and wretchedness of your sinful condition and the eternal damnation which you have merited. And thus the Law serves to prepare you for the reception of the Gospel.

The Law has done its work when it has opened your eyes for you so that you realise what a miserable sinner you are. The Law has done its work when it has crushed you and brought you to the verge of despair, so that you say, *Where shall I flee?*¹⁰

I am lost, there is no help for me, then, and not until then, will you receive the Gospel into your heart and rejoice in the salvation which the Lord Jesus has obtained for the whole fallen world.

May the Lord, then, grant us all, His grace that neither the Law nor the Gospel be proclaimed to us in vain, that by the preaching of the Law we are brought to the knowledge of our sin, and that by the preaching of the Gospel we find comfort, peace, and rest, until we enter into that eternal rest which God has prepared for His children. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 10:28

² Acts 16:31

³ Genesis 3:15

⁴ Genesis 28:14

⁵ Ezekiel 18:4

⁶ 1 Timothy 2:4

⁷ 2 Peter 3:9

⁸ Romans 1:16

⁹ Isa 64:6

¹⁰ Hymn 318