

What Then Is The Law?

Paul asks this question after he has shown that the covenant God made with Abraham to bless all nations through his seed was independent of the law. The law was not involved in the promised blessing. Anticipating objections from Judaizing teachers he phrased the question they were certain to ask: "*What then is the law?*" If inheritance was not through the law, why was the law given at all? Paul's answer is, "*It was added because of transgressions till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made*" (Gal. 3:19).

At least two different explanations are offered for this phrase, "*because of transgressions*" both of which are likely true. It was added to restrain transgressions. "*The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and unruly*" (1 Tim. 1:8). Then law also reveals and defines sin; all needful if one would please God and not disobey him. (For further explanation see Truth Commentary on Galatians, Mike Willis). Whatever the purpose of its being given; we cannot remove ourselves from the fact that it was "*added,*" not part of God's original covenant with Abraham, nor integral part of the blessing through Christ.

The tenure of its existence is spelled out: "*till the Seed should come to whom the promise hath been made.*" While the law was temporary, it served a needed, useful aim and existed by God's authority: "*it was ordained by angels in the hands of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one; but God is one*" (Gal. 3:19f). Does the writer intend to show the law to be inferior to the covenant by implying that God spoke directly to Abraham but was removed from Israel by speaking to angels, who then spoke with Moses, who then spoke to the people? Some think so. We have no quarrel with the conclusion that the law was inferior to the Covenant's Promised Blessing. However, we feel such observation is drawing a conclusion not necessarily inferred. For while God is said to have spoken to Abraham, we know that on more than one instance his message was conveyed through Angels (Genesis 18; 22:11; 15f). And on the other hand, while the scriptures reveal that angels gave the law to Moses (Gal. 3:19; Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:1-4); it is also said that God spoke to Moses with no implications that angels were intermediaries in speaking God's word (Exo. 3:4-7). The law was given by God. It did not set aside God's covenant with Abraham nor did it secure righteousness for them under it, but it expressed by God's Approval to them under it that those who did not obey it would be duly punished: "*Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward*" (Heb. 2:2).

Since the law was *“added,”* was it against the promises of God; viz, the promises God made to Abraham to bless all nations through his seed (Gal. 3:21)? Hastily the apostle responds, *“... God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law”* (Gal. 3:21). Paul herein cites the fatal flaw of the law: it could not make alive. It could kill (the wages of sin is death, Rom. 6:23); it could not make alive! Earlier Paul wrote: *“I do not make void the grace of God for if righteousness is of the law, then Christ died for nought”* (Gal. 2:21).

“But the scriptures shut up all things under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Gal. 3:22). This same thought is expressed in Romans 11:32: *“For God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.”* The apostle’s point is the law cannot justify him who it condemns and it condemns all because all have broken its precepts (Rom. 3:23). The Blessing to come upon all nations through Abraham’s seed is *“turning each one away from his iniquity”* -- forgiveness, and that comes through the Promised Seed, of Abraham, not through the law (Acts 3:26). NEXT: *“Before Faith Came ...”*

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