

## Why the Law?

Why do we have laws? What purpose is served by governments restricting us from activities that might serve our interests - like shoplifting, or blackmail, or impaired driving? Wouldn't we be better off if we could all just do what we want?

How would you feel living in a part of the world where there were no limits - and therefore no police forces, no judicial system and shop owners defended their daily profits with loaded weapons? Would you feel safer? more free or less free? more or less in control of your destiny? Only the people who believe in the inherent goodness of human beings would even want to attempt such a system, but it would quickly devolve into chaos.

A couple of Fridays ago in Santiago, Chile, people were out in the parks in the early afternoon, the sun was shining, the weather was warm and the atmosphere peaceful. One person commented, "If you'd told us that afternoon that our city would be in chaos by nightfall, we'd have thought you were crazy." But by evening, thousands of protestors had hit the streets, and soon the burning and looting and violence had taken over. The excuse was a proposed 4% rise in subway fares - but, as always, there is a lot more under the surface. Laws were being broken by the minute and the army was called in. Fifteen people had died by the following Tuesday and the violent protests continued, and that's in a civilized, modern and relatively prosperous country like Chile. It makes you wonder what might happen here if the Canucks got beat in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup playoffs or some other trigger event took place.

Now, think with me about Israel as they departed Egypt and crossed the Red Sea into the Sinai desert. What was their social order, their civilization, based on? All that those who were living at the time had known, was slavery. You did what the slave masters told you to do or you were beaten or whipped. There was no separate Israelite civilization in the Egypt of the day - the Israelites were completely subject to the laws of the Egyptians. When they crossed into the Sinai desert, they were free, but they had no social order, no governing principles. They had their tribes and their families, but that's not much to build a cohesive network around which to serve the needs of maybe as many as 2 million people.

And so God gave them a legal code, rules around which they could function, not simply in relation to one another, but also, and primarily, in relation to their God. The law protected them from injustice in their dealings with one another. But it also bound them in covenant relationship to their God. It required them to release slaves and return property that had been taken in pledge for debts at certain prescribed intervals. But it also required the people to celebrate the Feasts of Yahweh and His Sabbath days of reset. It described in detail the design of the Tabernacle and the roles of the priests and Levites in Israelite life. In other words, it was a law that encompassed all of life, both at the human level and in the spiritual realm of relationship with God. It told people how to live in a godly way and how to honour God in one's worship.

But even within the law itself, God was making it clear that this wasn't going to be Israel's salvation. Within the law itself, you read words like this: "If you obey My laws and regulations, you will find life through them." (Lev. 18:5) In the passage we'll read today, we see Paul quoting that verse and comparing it with the life of faith - let's get to the passage now.

*But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under His curse, for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all these commands that are written in God's Book of the Law." (Deut. 27:26) Consequently, it is clear that no one can ever be right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." (Hab. 2:4) How different from this way of faith is the way of the law, which says, "If you wish to find life by obeying the law, you must obey all of its commands." (Lev. 18:5)*

*But Messiah has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When He was hung on the cross, He took upon Himself the curse for our wrong-doing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Deut. 21:23) Through the work of Jesus Messiah, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham, and we Christians receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.*

*Dear friends, here's an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or amend an irrevocable agreement, so it is in this case. God gave the promise to Abraham and his child. And notice that it doesn't say the promise was to his children, as if it meant many descendants. But the promise was to his child — and that, of course, means Christ. This is what I am trying to say: The agreement God made with Abraham could not be canceled 430 years later when God gave the law to Moses. God would be breaking His promise! For if the inheritance could be received only by keeping the law then it would not be the result of accepting God's promise. But God gave it to Abraham as a promise.*

*Well then, why was the law given? It was given to show people how guilty they are. But this system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made. (Galatians 3:10-19)*

There's more, but I'm going to stop there. Let's look at what Paul is doing and what he's not doing in this part of chapter 3. Is he saying that the law was a bad idea? Is he saying that the law has been a failure? Is he saying that the law is too harsh or just not the right instrument for guiding a nation? I don't think he's saying any of those things.

He is saying what almost every Jew of his day would agree on - that the Jewish people have failed in their calling to obey God's law and that they are, therefore, under a curse. That's how the Jews saw themselves - as people living under the curses of Deuteronomy 27, 28 and 29. They were also a people hoping that if they could only return to the LORD the way they were called to do in Deuteronomy 30, they could once again experience the blessings of Yahweh on their personal and national life.

So Paul is saying that the law was good and right, but that the people of God had failed again and again to obey that law, to honour God with their obedience. As a result, they were under the curse that those three chapters of Deuteronomy described and needed to be delivered. But Paul says that their failure is not unexpected, not a failure that others would not have fallen into, but a purposeful failure, a failure that everyone at every time would experience. "It's not just you guys," says Paul, "but it's every human being. We are all under a curse because of our disobedience."

Why were the Jews under no illusions about their being guilty according to Deuteronomy? Largely because of the suffering they had been through for the past 650 years. There was the defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and his destruction of their beloved Temple, followed by 70 years of exile. When they returned they were a much smaller nation and often under the thumb of other empires - after Persia, it was Greece and later Rome. They felt the failures of their ancestors, the failure to honour God by keeping His laws, and they faced constant reminders of the penalties for these failures. The Syrian Greek ruler Antiochus IV defiled their temple in Jerusalem and later a group of Samaritans did the same. The presence of Roman legions with their Imperial banners living in their headquarters right next to the Temple grounds was a bitter and present reminder that they were under a curse. They were continually oppressed by the occupying armies, through taxes, through being forced to provide food for soldiers, and sometimes through forced labour. They were slaves in their own country - the feel of defeat was constant - the curse was real.

What Paul introduces in this section that is radically new and challenging to those whose world view is formed by a Jewish perspective is this: "Messiah has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When He was hung on the cross, He took upon Himself the curse for our wrong-doing. For it is written in the Scriptures, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" No one was expecting that Messiah would be under a curse. He was to be the Deliverer! A cursed Messiah is no part of the Jewish expectation. The Jews felt that they were currently experiencing - and had for generations experienced - the curse of their own disobedience, but now Paul is saying that God's way of dealing with that curse is to take it on Himself on the cross. Somehow, in that act of costly sacrifice, Jesus was removing the curse that came from human disobedience to God's law. He took the curse that had been appropriately applied to human beings, for their disobedience, and made it His own. "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." And somehow, and we don't need to understand the mechanics of how this happened, what we deserved became His experience and we were blessed with the forgiveness of God.

This is what Paul moves on to in the next few verses. He says that through the work of Jesus Messiah, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham and that we who believe received the promised Holy Spirit through faith. I hope that you notice how prominent the Holy Spirit is in these teachings from the apostle Paul. His presence as the fulfilment of God's promise is mentioned over and over again - including here in verse 14. This gift of the Spirit is essential to living the life of faith. It has taken over from the role that the law once had. The Spirit is the One

who guides us into right living, into making decisions that honour God, into ministering in His Name, into bringing the life and truth of Jesus to the people in our world. I just thought I should mention that again before we pass on into the next section of Paul's teaching.

Verse 15: Paul introduces an example of what he's been trying to say. God made a promise to Abraham - Paul calls it an "irrevocable agreement". Irrevocable, because God doesn't go back on His word. He doesn't make promises and then decide to change His mind about them. The promise He made to Abraham was not a conditional one, based on something that Abraham would have to do, but one based entirely in God's character.

And, the promise that God made to Abraham would not be erased by the coming of the law centuries later. That would imply that God would be breaking His promise. So the promise, which, in Paul's interpretation pointed all the way forward in time to the coming of Jesus, could not be altered by the introduction of the Mosaic law. Rather, the promise, in a sense, superseded the law. It was more ancient, and looked farther into the future. It more fully represented what God wanted to accomplish. This becomes clear in the verses that follow:

*For if the inheritance could be received only by keeping the law, then it would not be the result of accepting God's promise. But God gave it to Abraham as a promise. (Gal. 3:18)*

To say what Paul is saying as simply as possible: God promised to bless the nations of the world through Abraham's descendant - which turned out to be Jesus - and this promise was not altered or restricted in any way by the later addition of the law.

Then the question has to be asked: "What purpose does the law have, then?" Paul's answer is, "It was given to show people how guilty they are." How could we ever gain the humility to receive God's forgiveness if we felt there was nothing to forgive? That's a real problem in the culture of our day. People don't get that they need forgiveness because they assume they're just as good as the next guy. If we are to be the measuring stick by which we discover goodness or evil, then we're always going to say, "I'm okay." But if there is an external measuring stick, provided by God, that shows us what goodness really is, then we don't have that excuse any more. We can easily see that we don't measure up and we can experience appropriate guilt, or an appropriate sense of responsibility for our short-comings. That is absolutely necessary if we are going to come to Jesus and ask for forgiveness. Otherwise, we won't experience that regret, we'll just make excuses for things that go wrong, and we won't be able to acknowledge that we need forgiveness.

Paul then adds this fuller explanation: "This system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made." The system of law was only ever intended to last until the time of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit after His death and resurrection.

I want to close off this teaching by reading just a few more verses that will end this section of the purpose of the law:

*Well then, is there a conflict between God's law and God's promises? Absolutely not! If the law could have given us new life, we could have been made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures have declared that we are all prisoners of sin, so the only way to receive God's promise is to believe in Jesus Messiah. Until faith in Messiah was shown to us as the way of becoming right with God, we were guarded by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until we could put our faith in the coming Saviour. (3:21-23)*

Let's sum up what Paul has been saying about the law and its purpose:

1. The law is good, a gift from God
2. The law teaches us that we need a Saviour - we wouldn't know our guilt before God unless the law showed it to us
3. The law, in itself, is powerless to change us, to make us able to keep its requirements
4. Disobedience to the law was tantamount to rebellion against God and resulted in a curse on the person who disobeyed

Now, the good news about the law:

1. Jesus' death was the equivalent of Him taking our curse onto Himself through His sacrifice
2. This is the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, that God would bless all nations of the world through Him, through His descendant
3. The fulfilment of the Promise means that the law must give way to the presence of the Holy Spirit who will now serve as our inspiration and guide.
4. We receive all of this by trusting in the promise. by trusting that Jesus has made the new way to the Father, and not by trying to fulfill the requirements of the law of Moses

The Promise of God, made to Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus Messiah, is a wonderful gift to all who receive it. But it's not necessarily an easy gift to receive. I want to close this message with a look at this very important question: why is it hard for people to receive God's gift of grace, the gift He promised to Abraham and delivered on through Jesus?

I can see a few reasons - but there are likely many more:

1. We become so used to law, to rules, all the things that govern our daily lives, that when grace breaks in, it doesn't fit. It seems too open-ended, too easy for God to be taken advantage of, that we look for something with more structure. The law has more structure than grace does and yet it demands less from us than the Holy Spirit does.
2. Grace threatens our pride more than almost anything I can think of. We always think that we can, and should, do better at this thing called living. We think we should be able to love more, to give more, to think of ourselves less, to live for God more, to be more grateful and kind and good. Who in our world finds it easiest to embrace the Good News of God's grace? Think of Russia, after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Where were the pockets of faith that had withstood the barrage of

state-required atheism? In the prison system and among some of the older Russian women. Philip Yancey gives us a glimpse in What's So Amazing About Grace (p. 256). "I will never forget a meeting in which Moscow journalists wept — I had never before seen journalists weep — as Ron Nikkel of Prison Fellowship International told of the underground churches that were now thriving in Russia's penal colonies. For seventy years prisons had been the repository of truth, the one place where you could safely speak the name of God. It was in prison, not church, that people such as Solzhenitsyn found God." Where people know that they have nothing to lose, that they are desperately poor and in need of grace, there they will find grace.

3. A third reason why people reject God's gift is fear. I can't think why else there are churches in North America that are proudly full of hatred towards people they disagree with. Someone asked me this week why there was a church in Texas that picketed the funerals of servicemen and I had to say, "I have no idea, but they clearly don't want to look like Jesus." I've thought about it a lot, and I just think the anger, the hatred, must come from fear. We see society changing, rejecting Christian values and those who promote those values. And some of us feel like we have to fight back, to fight for things we know are good and true and right. And somehow in fighting the fight we become filled with hatred and we can't keep it to ourselves anymore. It's a good part of the reason that much of the radical left, at least in the US, hates the Christian church.
4. I think a fourth reason people reject grace is that they see it as a sign of weakness. They like to be seen as strong, so they criticize others and find fault with even respected Christian leaders. Billy Graham once went to the Soviet Union and met with their government and church leaders. Back home, he was met with criticism. He should have been more prophetic, condemning their abuses of human rights and religious freedom. One of his critics accused him of setting the church back fifty years. Graham listened, lowered his head and replied, "I am deeply ashamed. I have been trying very hard to set the church back 2000 years."

Whatever the reasons, rejecting God's promise, turning away from grace, is a tragic mistake, the worst kind of sin. Hear Paul pleading with the Galatians not to turn their backs on the Promise. And resolve to be one of the helpless, humble, hopeful people who are not too full of our own wisdom to welcome the Holy Spirit to lead us, to guide our lives, to make us fruitful and whole in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is God's gift to us.