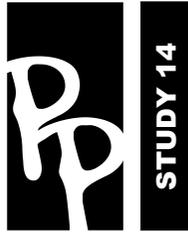


WHAT THEN IS THE PURPOSE

OF THE LAW?



Galatians 3:19-25

This Study Paper contains the following

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Some further background notes
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Introduction to the passage

In this part of the letter Paul is explaining to the Galatians why the law of Moses was inappropriate as the way to be made right with God. Paul had brought them the gospel of free salvation, which was based upon God's grace. It was the same basis upon which God had dealt with Abraham. God reckoned Abraham to be a righteous man and promised the inheritance of eternal life, which would come through his seed, Jesus Christ. The Galatians had trusted in Jesus Christ and his atoning work on the cross. They were now part of the promise, they were the spiritual descendants of Abraham. The law of Moses, advocated by the false teachers, was the wrong type of covenant to follow to obtain eternal life. Why then was the law given to Moses? What was its purpose? After all, major parts of the Pentateuch¹ are devoted to the law of Moses. Paul in verses 19-25 explains to the Galatians why the law was given and what its function was.

1. The first five books of the Old Testament. The word comes from the Greek "pentateuchos" meaning five volumes. The books are known in Hebrew as "the law". A booklet, *Bible Survey; The Pentateuch*, is available from Grace Baptist Mission.

What these verses mean

Verse 19

What, then, was the purpose of the law?

If the way of salvation was established from Abraham's time (by grace through faith), what was the use of the law? Paul imagines the false teachers arguing with him, accusing him of teaching against the law – see Acts 21:28. Paul explains:

It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

The law was added, temporarily (until Christ came), to teach the Jews that they were sinners because they could not keep it. So the law demonstrated the need for a salvation that is graciously given to law-breakers. See Romans 3:20. The law was to make the Jews long for Christ to be their Saviour, because they could not earn salvation by law-keeping.

The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator.

The law was not so wonderful as the promise to Abraham. God spoke directly through angels and by Moses, reaching the Israelites only in third place. The law was given to Israel through the mediation of Moses. If there is a mediator there must also be two parties. The law given at Sinai was a contract, which placed obligations upon the two parties, i.e. on God and man. If a person fulfilled his side of the contract by being totally obedient to the law then God would keep his side of the agreement and accept that person as being righteous.

Verse 20

A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

Paul restates the difference between the two types of covenant. By contrast to the law of Moses, "God is one" signifies that God acted alone in the covenant of promise. In the case of the law, human obedience is required and this is where it has its weakness. The covenant of promise is God's gracious gift, requiring nothing from man except acceptance.

Verse 21

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises² of God?

We can imagine, having reached this point of the argument, someone asking Paul, "Is there a conflict between the promise given to Abraham and the law given to Moses?" Paul anticipates that such thoughts

2. "Promises" is plural because God gave the same promise of salvation repeatedly to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

would be in the minds of his Galatian readers and asks the question for them in order to set out the answer.

Absolutely not!

The answer is emphatic. God is the author of both law and promise and so therefore there can be no antagonism between the two.

For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.

There is nothing wrong with the law itself being a way of salvation. The basis of our being made righteous in God's sight is Christ being the perfect man, obeying the law in its completeness. If Jesus had not been able to totally obey the law then God the Father could not have accepted his sacrifice on the cross. But the resurrection of Jesus showed that his sacrifice was accepted, the law had been kept and Jesus was fully righteous. That righteousness is credited to anyone who receives the gift of faith from God and puts that faith into practice by believing on Jesus as the Saviour. Jesus Christ was the only man who never sinned. Everyone else is a sinner and cannot become righteous before God by trying to obey the law given to Moses.

In verse 17 Paul said the law did not **alter** God's promises to the patriarchs in any way. Now Paul says the promises do not **depend** on the law being kept. The way of salvation remains by the free promise of God without conditions. The law was not given to be an alternative way of salvation. God's two arrangements are not in conflict with each other. Indeed, because of human sinfulness inherited from Adam, the law cannot justify anyone (Rom. 8:3) and cannot be a way of salvation.

Verse 22

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin,

The failure of man to keep God's laws is not something that Paul had just discovered. The Scriptures testify to this fact. When the law was given to Moses it was known that it was impossible for human beings to conform. The Old Testament is a continual record of human disobedience and failure. The promise given to Abraham in trust until the coming of Christ shows that God knew the condition of fallen man and his inability to please a holy God. The Old Testament contains accurate descriptions of the human condition (see Deuteronomy 27:26; 2 Kings 17:2-17, Psalm 143:2; Isaiah 1:4, Jeremiah 17:9, Ezekiel 16:15 as examples).

so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

The condemning work of the law is valuable, making salvation by

promise attractive. Who will desire salvation unless he knows there is something to be saved from? Christ saves no sheep but lost sheep, and calls not the righteous but sinners to repentance. The law convinces of the need of salvation.

Verse 23

Before this faith came,

"The faith" here means not a believer's act of personal trust but the gospel message about Jesus Christ – the Christian faith. Paul means "before the gospel came". The word "came" is in a form that means something that came at a precise historical point in the past.

we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.

The idea Paul is conveying is being locked in prison for your own good until it is the right time to be let out. Sinners cannot by themselves escape the condemnation of God's laws, which they have broken. While in this imprisoned state the people were made to realise their state of helplessness. This was necessary to make the Jews ready to receive the Messiah who was coming. i.e. the Jews could only wait for the gospel age which was to come.

Verse 24

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Paul is saying that the time of the Mosaic law was the Old Testament time before the gospel came with Jesus Christ. The idea Paul has in mind is the slave in Roman times whose duty it was to make sure the child of the household went regularly to school and behaved properly. "The law was our guardian till Christ came" is another way of saying this. Paul is showing how foolish those teachers were who taught that believers must believe the gospel and keep the law of Moses for salvation. The law was not to be added to the gospel. The law preceded the gospel and had prepared the Jews for the coming of the gospel.

Verse 25

Now that faith has come,

Literally, "the faith", i.e. the gospel, the Christian faith (see verse 23).

we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Now that we have seen the perfect life of Christ, we no longer need to be convinced by the laws we have broken that we are helpless sinners needing to be saved by gracious forgiveness. Christ's purity condemns our sin. Christian believers no longer need a guardian to teach them

how to behave. They are now children of God (verse 26) with God's nature in them. Why go backwards in history and live again under the law? This is what some were wrongly teaching the Galatians to do. See 5:18.



Some further background notes

1. The Galatian Christians were mostly Gentile converts. They would not have known the law of Moses as the Jews did. So why does Paul write to them about the purpose of **the Jewish law**? Two points:-
 - A. The Galatians were being influenced by teachers who were teaching Jewish laws to them and urging them to keep those laws.
 - B. The pagan religion of Galatia was a religion of earning salvation by doing deeds of merit. This is the same idea as **salvation by works** that the Jews had adopted when they thought that keeping the law of Moses would earn their salvation. So Paul's arguments do apply equally to Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles would grow weary of their inability to keep their own laws adequately (see Study 9 in the first volume and the note on 2:19), and so should be prepared to welcome the gospel of a gracious Saviour, just as the Jews should.
2. When Paul says that Christian believers no longer need the guardianship of the Mosaic law to guide their behaviour, he is not suggesting they can now live lawlessly. Anyone in whose life the Holy Spirit dwells cannot carelessly live in disobedience to God. Paul will go on to explain that the believer must walk in the Spirit (5:16), be led by the Spirit (5:18), live in the Spirit (5:25) and fulfil the law of Christ (6:2). The Christian believer shapes his life now by the new pattern of life seen in Jesus Christ, which has replaced the old pattern of the law of Moses. So the believer will not be lawless, but Christ-like.



Summary

If the law given to Moses cannot be used by people to gain their salvation (i.e. being made right with God) why then did God give the law? What was its purpose? Firstly, it was given so that the Jewish people could have some way of seeing that they were sinners. It was when the law was given that people could see exactly what God required of them. Without the law they were unable to see that they were transgressors. It is only when a speed limit is introduced by a law that we come to know that we break the law by driving too fast. So the law emphasised the condition of people and pointed them to Christ. The law itself could not save people. Secondly, the law was to be for a temporary period only, until the coming of Jesus Christ. It prepared the Jewish nation for the gospel age. Once Jesus came, the law had served its primary purpose, although it remains as Scripture and contains instruction in righteousness and shows the biblical view of morality and holiness. There is therefore no conflict between the law and the promise, because God is the author of both.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

You can't make a saint by laws (3:21)

1. Our daily lives are made up of our performing regular ceremonies and keeping to certain rules of behaviour.
2. All the world's religions consist of regularly repeating certain ceremonies and practices daily, weekly, yearly. It is possible also for some who call themselves Christians to believe that the careful observance of Christian ceremonies is necessary for their salvation.
3. When Paul says, "If there had been a law given which could have given life" (verse 21) he means: "It is not possible to obtain spiritual life by keeping rules and ceremonies." Why is that?

1 Because laws make us worse sinners! – "added because of transgressions" (verse 19).

We may fail to keep rules and ceremonies because we are ignorant of them. When we **do** learn of them, we realise our failure is worse than we had thought; compare Romans 5:20. The laws have exposed us to be more guilty than we realised.

Sometimes rules make us worse sinners because our sinful natures desire to do the very thing the rules forbid. To say, “Don’t do that” to a child often causes him or her to do that very thing out of a spirit of daring. So we are tempted to do what is forbidden. Here is one reason why rules and regulations do not bring us to life!

2 Because laws are like a prison. “prisoner of sin” (verse 22). “held prisoners by the law, locked up” (verse 23). The idea behind these words is being put into prison. The moment anyone fails to keep any law or regulation correctly, that person becomes guilty of breaking that rule. There is no way to escape that guilt. Even if other rules and ceremonies are correctly observed, the guilt of the one broken rule remains. Everyone living by any rules and ceremonies is shut tight in a prison of guilt as soon as one mistake is made. Guilt once gained can never be lost by further rule-keeping. This is another reason why rules and regulations do not bring us to life.

3 Because laws are like an alert taskmaster. “So the law was put in charge” (verse 24). The law acted like a taskmaster, put in overall charge. Living by rules and ceremonies is like being a slave to a taskmaster who never sleeps. The laws are always there, always demanding to be obeyed, always pointing out our faults, always restricting our freedom, always requiring **perfect** obedience. It is a hard life always striving to keep rules and regulations perfectly and sincerely. Once we admit we cannot do it, then we are punished by a sense of guilty failure, like a taskmaster whipping us. This is the third reason why rules and regulations do not bring us to life!

Conclusion

1. It must be clear that there is no hope for our salvation in any religion that consists of keeping rules and ceremonies. This includes **so-called Christians** whose religion is merely the observance of ceremonies.
2. It must be clear that Christ is the only Saviour, for he is the only person ever to live a perfect life, doing all that his Father willed. We must rely on his life and death to gain us favour with God. There is no other way.
3. Our behaviour after we have believed in Jesus will be shaped by his teachings, his example, his commands, and not by any other laws and ceremonies. We will want to express our love to Christ in every way that we know will please him. That is a life of liberty, not slavery to rules (5:1).

PP To think about

There are two views of the gospel illustrated in the Galatian letters. Paul’s view – salvation is by God’s free grace alone; other teachers’ view – salvation is by God’s grace **plus human efforts**. These two views of the gospel are still in the world. They are illustrated in the chart below. The chart is taken from “Tell the truth”, published by the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, U.S.A. 1981.

There is a view of the gospel, which makes a person important in his or her own salvation. This view is man’s thinking and says:	There is a view of the gospel, which makes God important in a person’s salvation. This view is the one the Bible teaches and says:
God loves you and wants you to let him save you.	God made you and therefore has the right to require you to serve him.
Human nature is damaged by sin but still has the power to choose spiritual good.	Human nature is dead in sin and cannot choose spiritual good until God quickens to new life.
God is a friend who will help to save you from your mistakes.	God is a king who must create a new nature in you because you are a rebel against him.
Sinners need salvation from unhappiness, poverty, ignorance.	Sinners need salvation from the guilt of disobedience to God.
Christ exists to benefit us, to give us what we want.	Sinners are saved to bring glory to God.
We are saved because we decided to choose Christ.	Our salvation is based on God’s choice of us – we respond to his quickening us.
We can receive Christ as Saviour but not have him as Lord.	If Christ is not our Lord, it is doubtful if he is our Saviour.
Assurance of salvation comes by a counsellor teaching us Bible promises.	Assurance of salvation comes by the Holy Spirit changing our lives through Bible truths.



Over to you

How much does our preaching and teaching gravitate towards human effort rather than God's sovereignty and grace?

Do we tell **the truth** when we tell the gospel? (see 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.)

How do you explain the relevance of the Ten Commandments to your people?