



# HOW LAW LEADS TO FREEDOM

*SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM*

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Galatians 3:15-24  
Ninth Message  
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In our studies in the book of Galatians we have been analyzing the concept of living freely as opposed to living under law. I pray that we will be able to identify the ways in which law operates in our lives so that, by the grace of God, we might learn that true freedom is to be found only in Christ.

That is easier said than done. Like a tangled electrical cord, our emotions are hard to unravel. It is difficult to see how law controls them. Of course, that is what legalism is—emotional control. We know that the way to salvation and freedom is by grace, not law, yet our behavior reflects the fact that we are confused about law, whether it be moral or religious law, or laws that we impose on our families and ourselves.

What is the purpose of the law anyway? we ask. How do law and grace relate? If we are to be free, it is imperative that we understand these issues more fully. These are the questions we will explore today, therefore, as we talk about the priority and the purpose of the law.

First, the priority of the law. We pick up the apostle's argument in chapter 3, verses 15-18:

**Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (3:15-18, NASB)**

Here Paul applies a human, legal principle to the covenant that God made with man. The point he is making is that once a human agreement is made and ratified, no one can alter or annul it.

Perhaps I can illustrate. A few years ago my wife and I signed an agreement to rent a home, with an option to purchase the home after one year. We wanted this clause recorded in the contract to ensure that no one could come in later and buy the property out from under us. When we went to record the option to buy, however, we found that the owner had changed the contract and deleted this part of the agreement. We confronted him, and voided the contract. Thankfully, we got our

deposit back. This is the principle that Paul is talking about. Once an agreement is made, neither party can change it without the consent of the other.

Actually God made two agreements with man, one based on promise, the other on law. Here Paul is explaining the relationship between the two. The first agreement, the promise, was God's idea, and it was based on his character. A promise, we know, is an undertaking in which someone vows to do something. We do not think of a promise as a conditional thing; it is normal to expect people to fulfill their word. If I promise to do something for someone, my promise does not change based on the other person's conduct. Here in Galatians, Paul says that God made certain promises to Abraham and to his descendants, or "seed." This collective noun is referring to one seed, whom the apostle identifies as Christ.

The book of Genesis records these promises. God said to Abraham: "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).

"...all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth then your descendants can also be numbered" (Gen. 13:15-16).

"...one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:4-5).

"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8).

"Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (Gen. 17:19).

Thus God made a covenant with Abraham in which he undertook to give him a seed, a land, and a blessing; in other words, an heir, an inheritance, and a heritage. Now the covenant was God's idea; Abraham had nothing to do with it. But Paul says that this promise to Abraham was also given to the seed of Abraham, who was Christ. Christ would come from the line of Abraham, and in this seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. So the promise was not only a promise of land, but also a spiritual promise of salvation, because through the seed, which is Christ, salvation would come. The promise therefore was universal, and it was unifying, in that it did not distinguish between Jew and Gentile.

We find that this promise, this covenant, the fulfillment of which would set things right between God and man, is referred to throughout the entire Old Testament. In Genesis 3, for instance, God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed who was to come would destroy the work of the evil one. God made this promise to Noah: "I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you" (Gen. 9:9). The promise was also made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, and David. To David, for example, God said: "The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:11-13).

So throughout the OT, the promise is revealed that someone of the seed of Adam, the seed of Noah, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David, was coming. This seed, who was Christ, would receive the promise, and he would bless the world. Paul is saying that anyone who is in Christ, therefore, receives the same promises—a family, an identity, an inheritance, a blessing.

Next, the apostle refers to a second arrangement which God made, namely, the law. But he points out that the law was given four hundred and thirty years after the promise was made to Abraham. This arrangement, which was an external set of rules and regulations, was very different from the first; and Israel agreed to live by it. Notice that the law was given only to the Jews; it was not a commitment to bless all the nations of the earth. The apostle's point is that the second agreement, the second covenant, which was given hundreds of years after the original promise was made to Abraham, did not invalidate the first. The original promise, therefore, had a greater priority. We have already seen that a promise cannot be changed once it is given, therefore the law does not nullify the original promise. The promise is primary, the law secondary. The two do not have equal weight or significance.

The point is obvious: God bestows grace on the basis of his promise, not on the basis of man's efforts to obey the law. If grace could be earned by law, that would invalidate the promise, wouldn't it? God's intention all along was that redemption, salvation, would be based on promise and promise alone. He never intended law to replace the promise. Promise, therefore, is God's primary way of relating to man.

Our families teach us this lesson. For example, on my wedding day my wife and I made a covenant with each other. Not long afterwards we found ourselves making laws for our marriage, for ourselves, and for each other, involving things like how we would keep house, share responsibilities, etc. More often than not, however, we ignored these "laws" which we made for each other. The fact that we did not meet them did not nullify the original promise that we made to each other on our wedding day, however. That is because our commitment to one another is based not on law or on performance, but on promise. I can tell you that it is a wonderful thing to be in love after twenty years of marriage. If our relationship had been based on law, however, then we would not have experienced the blessing of promise.

The same thing is true with my children. Children need laws, discipline, boundaries—things like television programs they can watch, curfews, approved friendships, etc. My experience has been that the laws that my wife and I established were tested and broken at times. Yet my love and my commitment to my children has never changed, even when they violated the laws that I imposed. Why? It is because I am committed to them, based on promise, not on performance (although I am sure that I have given them mixed signals in this regard.) My love for them grows and deepens even when they don't measure up, especially when they have violated the laws of our home. This is because my commitment to them is based on promise, not law.

Frequently the problem we have in our relationship with God is the same problem that Israel had: we are confused by law and promise. We become Christians based on promise, and we find ourselves ushered into a glorious new life. We believe, and we are made alive. Our spirits are resurrected from the dead. This transformation brings us joy and freedom. But slowly, that first glow begins to fade. We start having doubts. After a while we begin to act like Israel—we become educated in the law. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, law takes priority over promise. We begin to look to law to mend our hearts. We look to law to find acceptability with God, and approval in church. Law begins to define our relationships. What was once a vibrant life in the Spirit decays into the routine, predictable, boring, listless life of the legalist. What has happened? We have reversed the priorities of law and promise. We forget the promise that we are blessed in the seed, that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law."

God granted life to Abraham based on promise, and

he grants it to us by means of the same promise. That will always be God's primary way of relating to us.

So if the law creates so many problems, why did God give it to Israel in the first place? In verses 19-20, Paul reveals three reasons for the law.

**Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. Now one mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. (3:19-20)**

According to Paul, the law was given for a certain season—until Christ came. It was intended to be a temporary measure. It was “added because of transgressions.” The apostle is saying that the law was given, first, to expose sin, to make transgressions visible. The law does not deal with the root problem of sin; it is merely a stop-gap measure. Obviously, the apostle is referring to moral issues, not things like circumcision and holy days.

How then does the law operate? Let me give you an example. Say you are driving down the street and you see a policeman, what is the first thing you do? You immediately look at your speedometer, don't you? You were not even thinking about breaking the speed limit, or committing some other infraction, but the law tells you that you are doing something illegal. (If it was exceeding the speed limit, we are quick justify ourselves by saying that the limit should be higher.) Here is another example of how the law operates. You are reading something in the Bible about gossip, and suddenly you are convicted about a conversation you had in the morning; or you are listening to a tape on sexual purity, and suddenly you are forced you to deal with your lustful thoughts. That is the function of the law—to expose sin. Although we are not under law, still the law actually works in this way in the life of a Christian. It doesn't fix the problem; it merely reveals it.

Note that Paul makes a very interesting comment on how promise and law were given. Paul says that the law came through a mediator, who was Moses. Mediation demands at least two parties; one cannot mediate on behalf of one party. And not only was a mediator involved, angels were, too. So the law came from God, to angels, to Moses, to man. Here Paul is implying that the law is inferior to the promise, since the promise was spoken directly by God to Abraham (there was no angelic intervention, and no human mediation). The promise was a one-party agreement, while the law was a two-party agreement.

Another interesting implication here is that God is one. F.F. Bruce comments: “The one God is God of Jews and Gentiles alike. The law divided them; the gospel brings them together. And since the God of Jews and Gentiles is one, it is fitting that he should provide one way of salvation for both—the way of faith” (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Eerdmans, 1982] 179).

Paul asks a second question in verse 21:

**Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (3:21-23)**

Do the law and the promise work against each other and lead us in different directions? Paul's emotional response is, “May it never be!” His logical response is that the law does not contradict the promise, because the law cannot yield righteousness. If the law could make us alive, then righteousness would be through the law and there would be no need for the promise. But the law and the promise are two different things.

Rather, Paul says that the law “imprisons all things under sin.” Here is the second purpose for the law: it not only exposes sin, it keeps sinners in jail—“shutting up all men under sin.” The phrase “shut up” means, “to hem in or coop up, confine, imprison.” The term “hold in custody” means “protect by military guards.” When it is applied to a city, it is used of both keeping the enemy out and shutting in the inhabitants.

In Paul's metaphor the jail is sin, and the warden is the law. The warden is a reminder that there is no way of escape; the sinner is trapped. So rather than being a means of escape, the law is the very thing that demonstrates that sin holds us in its grasp. In effect, the law shows us how desperate and hopeless we are. The law makes the promise more desirable and more indispensable, but it is designed to operate before faith comes.

Recently I received a ticket from the city of San Jose. It was issued for a car I no longer own, because the person who bought my car failed to register it. The law, in effect, is holding me responsible. I want to be free of this problem, but I am being held in custody by the demands of the law. When we are confronted with some area of sin or weakness in our lives, the law confronts us with the reality that we are imprisoned and we cannot deliver ourselves. John Stott wrote: “The function of the law was not to bestow salvation, however, but to convince men of their need of it. To quote Andrew Jukes, ‘Satan would have us to prove ourselves holy by the law, which God gave to prove us sinners’” (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 89-90).

Finally, Paul gives a third purpose for the law, in verse 24: the law was designed to lead us to Christ.

**Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. (3:24)**

The word “tutor” here is misleading. “Tutor” implies a teaching role, but that is not the case with the historical use of this term. The “custodian” was a slave who would lead the child to school each day. He was not the

teacher; he was merely a guide and disciplinarian. Often he was harsh to the point of cruelty. (He is usually depicted in ancient drawings with a cane in his hand. See 1 Cor. 4:15, 21). When the child grew up, the custodian was no longer needed. In this metaphor the law is likened to a custodian. It is a temporary arrangement for children until they mature. It does not teach, rather it leads us to the teacher. It was not intended to give life, but to lead us to life—life in Christ.

Thus Paul says that the purpose of the law is threefold: first, to expose sin; second, to keep us in the prison of sin until we are released by faith; and third, to lead us to Christ. The law is temporary, but the promise is permanent. The law is secondary; the promise is primary. The law prepares us for the promise by forcing us to see our need and reach the age of responsibility. The promise of a seed, and of blessing through that seed, was God's first and only plan for grace, salvation, and redemption. The law was never intended to save us.

John Stott has an excellent word for us here: "Not until the law has bruised and smitten us will we admit our need of the gospel to bind up our wounds. Not until the law has arrested and imprisoned us will we pine for Christ to set us free. Not until the law has condemned and killed us will we call upon Christ for justification and life. Not until the law has driven us to despair of ourselves will we ever believe in Jesus. Not until the law has humbled us even to hell will we turn to the gospel to raise us to heaven" (*Galatians*, 93).

This middle section of Galatians is rather heavy and theological, so let me conclude by giving two points of application from this section of Paul's argument.

First, we are meant to fail, and the law ensures that we will fail. It was never designed to help us find approval or success. No one is justified by means of the law. On the contrary, the law was designed to reveal our utter failure. We were never meant to be perfect. God expects us to fail. Why else would he have given the law? Therefore, our failure is guaranteed.

I don't know about you, but the thought that I don't have to be perfect takes a very heavy load off my back. My wife knows I'm not perfect. My children know it; even my dog knows it. But someone forgot to tell me. The fact that God does not expect me to be perfect is a wonderfully freeing thing. It frees me from striving for perfection. It frees me from pretending I am succeeding when in fact I'm not. It allows me to stop living with the dread fear of failure weighing me down.

If we insist on placing ourselves under law we are doomed to the treadmill of trying to be perfect, trying to achieve, satisfy, and perform. We mistakenly think that if we can succeed in our efforts to obey it, then we will taste life. But this way of living minimizes risk, maximizes security, and stifles freedom. Any formula that prevents failure also prevents freedom. "He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness" (F. O. Mattiessen, quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 97). The law demonstrates that we are not perfect. When we come to place where we can admit our failure, it is then that we become free. The goal is faith, not human perfection.

And second, God wants us to relate to him on the basis of his promises, just as Abraham did. Some of you have a doctorate and you make half a million dollars a year. Others of you struggle to make it through the day. But God allows the law to press heavily upon rich and poor alike until we break at last and admit that we cannot achieve perfection. It is at that point that we no longer need the custodian; we are ready to relate to God on the basis of his promise alone.

When we awake in the morning our first thoughts should be of promise, not law. Our first thoughts should be to consider what God has already done for us, not what we can do for him. Our first thoughts should be that we have life by God's promise; there is nothing we can do to gain it. We have a difficult time accepting this, because the world and the flesh do not operate this way, but the word of God declares this to be true. As Eugene Peterson put it: "we live by faith and failure, by faith and forgiveness, by faith and mercy, by faith and freedom. We do not live successfully. Success imprisons. Success is an unbiblical burden stupidly assumed by prideful persons who reject the risks and perils of faith, preferring to appear right rather than to be human" (*Traveling Light*, 106).

The law is a goad that drives us back to God and to his promises. As it reveals our failures and our sin we are brought into greater intimacy with our Father. We hang our heads in shame and defeat, but then we hear his voice. He runs to us and embraces us. "You foolish child," he whispers, "I love you. And I promise I will always love you."

God does not want us to live by law, but rather to enjoy an intimate relationship with him, based on his promise and his finished work in Christ Jesus. Only when we begin to live like this will we will enter into the joy of true freedom.

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