

## What Was The Law 'Added Because Of Transgressions'?

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Few books of the Bible have caused as much controversy as Paul's letter to the Galatians. One source estimates that there are as many as 300 published interpretations of this epistle. As we all know, some have used Galatians to claim that the Ten Commandments and the other Old Testament laws are no longer in effect and that we now live only by what is written in the New Testament. From this flawed foundation, they teach that we do not have to keep the Sabbath or holy days.

Most of this idea stems specifically from what is written in Galatians 3, and the conventional "no-law" teaching usually proceeds along the following lines: In Galatians 3:14-18, Paul shows how our salvation through faith in Christ is a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham 430 years before the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the law. The apostle emphasizes that our inheritance of the promise does not come through the law. "For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (verse 18).

Then, Paul writes: "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" (verse 19). The "no-law" advocates point to this scripture, claiming that Paul concludes that the law was in effect only until Christ came, and now we no longer have to keep it. Verses 24-25 seem to reinforce this teaching: "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

What is Paul saying in these verses? Does he really mean that we no longer have to be concerned about what is written in God's law—the law which David said was so precious to him that it was "better to me than thousands of shekels of gold and silver" (Psalm 119:72)? Do we no longer have to obey the law which Paul himself said was "spiritual" (Romans 7:14) and "holy and just and good" (verse 12)? Does this make sense?

### The Traditional Explanation

Historically, the church of God has explained that in Galatians 3:19, Paul was talking about the "ceremonial law" and not God's spiritual law. God says that He did not command the Israelites to follow a system of sacrifices at the time He brought them out of Egypt, but to keep His spiritual laws (Jeremiah 7:21-23). Once the Israelites had shown that they were unwilling to obey His spiritual laws, God "added" the laws concerning animal sacrifices, washings and oblations to the already existing law of circumcision to keep the people in mind of their need for a Savior. Thus, Paul was saying that it was this law concerning these physical rituals that had been "added because of transgressions."

However, there are a number of problems with this explanation. First, Paul's writings show very little evidence that he recognized a clearly defined distinction between the "spiritual law" and the "ceremonial law." Granted, he did distinguish between the law of circumcision and the other commandments, as in I Corinthians 7:19, where he writes, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters." But when he deals with circumcision, he treats the subject more from the point of view of its spiritual symbolism

having been fulfilled upon conversion and baptism (Colossians 2:11-13) than from the angle that circumcision belongs to a different, non-binding set of laws.

Second, in numerous places in Galatians, Paul is obviously referring to the spiritual principles of the law and not to the ceremonies. For example, "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God" (Galatians 2:19) is similar to Romans 7:4, where he writes that we have died in the eyes of the law, and the law no longer has power to condemn us as sinners. This obviously refers to spiritual laws. Galatians 3:12 does also: "Yet the law is not of faith, but 'The man who does them shall live by them.'" This quotes from Leviticus 18:5, a passage dealing with sexual morality.

Third, a reference to the "ceremonial" law does not seem to match the flow of the text. In Galatians 3:15-18, Paul explains how the Mosaic covenant does not nullify the covenant that God had made with Abraham. He certainly is not talking about *only* the ceremonial law here but the *entire* Old Covenant. It seems very unlikely that he would suddenly begin talking exclusively about the ceremonial law in verse 19.

### **Background Important**

What, then, is Paul really saying in these much disputed verses? To grasp the meaning behind what Paul writes in Galatians, we must understand the historical and cultural background of the book and the major reasons why he felt compelled to write to the Galatian Christians.

We must remember that Paul wrote this mid-first century letter in a historical and cultural setting quite different than our own. Problems still cropped up about the apostles' efforts to integrate the Gentiles into what many perceived as a Jewish church. Some Pharisees were still upset that the Gentiles were neither being circumcised nor conforming to the customs of Judaism. Paul felt he must write this letter because some of these factions were drawing people in the Galatian church away from trusting in Christ for justification, causing them to put their trust in legalism and customs like circumcision.

The primary thrust of the letter shows the Galatians that the only way to receive forgiveness of sins and enter into a right relationship with God is through trusting in Christ's sacrifice. Secondly, Paul explains how the Gentile and Jewish converts are now one, so the old cultural barriers need to be broken down. The Jewish and Gentile communities should have mutual love and respect for each other.

In addressing the latter problem, Paul shows how the blessings of the New Covenant are essentially a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. In Galatians 3:6-9, he explains that those who have faith in Christ are sons of Abraham and that Scripture had prophesied about the Gentiles being justified by faith. In verses 10-13, he writes that no one can possibly be justified by the law because the law pronounces a curse, a death sentence, upon the sinner. Through His sacrifice Christ has redeemed us from this curse "that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (verse 14).

In verses 15-18, Paul further develops this concept by showing that the Old Covenant does not in any way negate the covenant that God had made with Abraham. He appeals to everyday experience to prove his point: Even in man's society, a covenant that has been confirmed cannot be annulled (verse 15). The promises made to Abraham were still valid, and God will keep those promises. In verse 16, he explains that the promises were made to both Abraham and Christ.

## **Law = Covenant**

Verse 17 is pivotal. This verse confirms that, when Paul was talking about the law, he was also talking about the entire Old Covenant. He uses "law" synonymously with "covenant."

The translators have difficulty deciding whether the "covenant" refers to the Mosaic covenant or the one made with Abraham. Most modern translations connect "covenant" to the one God made with Abraham. However, the more literal translations such as the King James version and *Young's Literal Translation* put the word "covenant" in the sentence so it refers to the Mosaic covenant. The *Emphatic Diaglott* translates it as, "Now this I affirm, that a covenant-engagement previously ratified by God, the Law, issued four hundred thirty years afterwards does not annul, so as to invalidate the promise." Thus, Paul viewed the law as the symbol and embodiment of the Old Covenant and used the terms "law" and "covenant" synonymously.

This agrees with the way the covenant was sometimes referred to in the Old Testament. In II Chronicles 6:11, Solomon says, "And there I have put the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD which He made with the children of Israel." Only the two tables of stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments were in the ark (II Chronicles 5:10).

Moses writes, "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13; see Exodus 34:28). Even without this evidence, it is very clear that Paul refers to the two covenants, not just to what we would consider the law itself.

As further evidence, notice how Paul used the term "law" in Galatians 4:21-23:

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons; the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise.

The births of Ishmael and Isaac are recorded in Genesis 16 and 21. Though this happened long before the Ten Commandments and the other laws were given through Moses, Paul refers to this portion of Scripture as the law! Obviously, Paul uses "law" to mean the entire Pentateuch or Torah (the first five books of the Bible), not just the Commandments. In Galatians 4:24, he specifically mentions the Old and New Covenants.

## **The Purpose of the Old Covenant**

Continuing in Galatians 3:18, "For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise." If we could receive the promised inheritance through the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant, it would not be by promise. This would contradict the fact that God had given Abraham an unconditional promise.

At this point in his epistle, it occurred to Paul that it would only be normal for someone to ask the question, "What, then, was the purpose of the Old Covenant?" Thus, Galatians 3:19 begins with, "What purpose then does the law serve?" This broad question covers many more specific ones: Why was it needed? Why did God call Israel out of Egypt? Why did God write His Ten Commandments on tables of stone with His own finger? Why did God have Moses write the statutes and judgments in

a book? Why did God establish the Levitical priesthood, the Tabernacle/Temple worship, the washings and oblations and the sacrifices? What was the purpose of all the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant? Such questions would naturally come to the mind of anyone reading Paul's letter since he emphasized that our salvation through Christ fulfills the promise made to Abraham. What need is there for another covenant?

The answer he gives is a key to understanding much of everything else he says in Galatians: "It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made." "It was added" means that the Mosaic covenant was in addition to the one God had made with Abraham. But what "transgressions"? Abraham obeyed all of God's laws, commandments, statutes and ordinances (Genesis 26:5). He taught God's laws to Isaac, who taught them to Jacob. However, after Israel was in Egypt for many years, they forgot them and lived in ignorant transgression of them. Having absorbed so much Egyptian culture in their sojourn, they were even ignorant of the Sabbath day. Paul explains that God "added" the Old Covenant because Israel had gone so far into sin when they lived in Egypt.

Therefore, God had to call Israel out of Egypt and teach them His laws all over again to prepare them for the coming of Christ. He wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone and Moses wrote the statutes and judgments in a book so that Israel would have a permanent record of His laws and statutes throughout the centuries. God gave them rituals of worship that made them different from other nations, and He forbade them to have anything to do with foreign, pagan customs. Circumcision identified them as a separate and distinct people. These rules and regulations put a hedge around Israel to preserve them pure for the coming of Christ.

Just prior to the scripture Paul quotes in Galatians 3:12, God says in Leviticus 18:3,

According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances.

For years, people have wondered how anyone could have transgressed the laws before they were given. Simply put, Paul is talking about the laws of God **WHICH HAVE BEEN IN FULL FORCE SINCE CREATION!** When he writes that the Old Covenant was added "till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made," he means that the Old Covenant was temporary; Christ would replace it with the New Covenant. Rather than saying that any of God's laws had become obsolete, he is explaining how important it was *to preserve the knowledge of God's laws* in Israel to prepare them for the coming of Christ!

### "All Sons of God"

Paul then shows in Galatians 3:21-22 how no one can obtain eternal life through the terms of the Old Covenant. Everlasting life comes by faith through the promise made to Abraham. He reiterates the purpose of the Old Covenant in verses 23-24:

But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

*Tutor* literally means "child-leader" and would be better translated "guardian" or "custodian." It was God's purpose to protect Israel from the sinful, pagan cultures of the world until Christ came. He found no other way to guard them except to put a hedge around them and make them a separate, distinct nation from all others in the world. He intended that the sacrifices keep them constantly aware of their need for a Savior.

In Galatians 3:25-27, Paul finally comes to the major point that he has been leading up to in this whole discussion: "But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Since Christ has come, the Old Covenant rules and regulations that isolated Israel from other ethnic groups are no longer needed. Israel no longer needed a guardian. The time had come to put away the need for the practices which separated Israel from other nations and caused such hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles. Christ had brought a totally new approach. The church, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), is a spiritual organism made up of people of all races and nationalities who repent and keep the spiritual laws of God as Jesus had magnified them.

Paul wanted the Jews to see why they should accept the Gentiles as equals and to silence those who were still trying to cling to the practices of the Old Covenant. Such "loyalty" to outmoded regulations was causing problems between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church. By addressing these problems directly, Paul tried to eradicate the heresy that was drawing the Galatians away from faith in Christ. He wanted them to understand that, in Christ, whether we are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female does not really matter, but we are all one in Him and heirs of the promise made to Abraham (Galatians 3:28-29). Everyone who repents and has faith in Christ is accepted by God and should be accepted by us.

Galatians 3 has nothing directly to do with the so-called "ceremonial law." It is concerned with the passing of the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:13), the elimination of the rules and regulations that separated Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:11-22), and the acceptance of the Gentiles into the church as equal heirs of God's promises (Romans 4). Paul is showing that the Old Covenant was an interim, temporary addition to the covenant made with Abraham. It was necessitated by Israel's transgressions of God's holy laws that had been—**AND STILL ARE!**—in full force and effect since Creation.

As we come to a greater understanding of Scripture, we see even more clearly how important God's laws are to those who would be followers of His Son. God worked many miracles in bringing Israel out of Egypt. He wrote His laws on tables of stone and His statutes in a book for the express purpose of preparing His people for the coming of Jesus Christ. Now that our Savior has come and has given us His Holy Spirit, enabling us to keep His laws in their spiritual intent, we must be even more motivated to overcoming, growing and diligently keeping those laws, which are "more to be desired . . . than gold, yea, than much fine gold" (Psalm 19:10).