

• **A question – What is the Law’s purpose?**

1. An Addition

2. Added because of Israel’s sinfulness

• **To intensify guilt?**

• **The law restrained sins through its heavy penalties**

• **It kept the nation of Israel in existence**

• **The law was for the wicked**

3. Temporary

4. Inferior

‘What then is the law?’ ^{□1} If the law of God was not at all a way of justification, not a way of new birth, not a way of sanctification, then what was it for? What exactly is it in the purpose of God? ‘It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made’ ^{□2}.

1. It was an addition to the gospel. ‘It was added...’, says Paul. It was something that was not originally necessary, but God added it on for His own purpose.

2. It was added because of Israel’s sinfulness. ‘It was added because of transgressions ...’ But what does Paul mean by this phrase? Some expositors think the Greek word here (*charin*) should be taken in its meaning ‘with a view to’ or ‘for the sake of’. Then the idea is that in some way the law was given to intensify the guilt of Israel, to ‘bring about’ transgressions, ‘to show people how guilty they are’ (as one translation has it). But I doubt whether this is what Paul meant. For a start in the way that it is normally stated, it is not true! People can be saturated with the law of Moses, but not feel in the least bit guilty! Only the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sinfulness and He does not need the law to do it. The Jewish leaders who murdered Jesus and who later murdered Stephen knew the command ‘You shall not commit murder’, but it did them no good at all. This way of reading the Greek word *charin* seems rather unnecessarily complicated, and the various interpretations along these lines do not seem to be true!

The meaning is much clearer if the word has its commoner meaning, ‘on account of’ or ‘because of’. ‘What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions ...’ The Canaanite nations were destined to be destroyed because of their extreme wickedness. God saved Abraham and many others in the family of Abraham. But in the days of Moses the people of God were about to become a nation. They had already shown tendencies to sin and wickedness. They were just as likely to fall into extreme sin as the Canaanites! So God gave the nation the law ‘because of transgressions’. The law restrained sin through its heavy penalties. If any one was guilty of idolatry they were to be executed. If anyone was guilty of breaking up the family by adultery with a married man or woman, the death penalty followed! If anyone broke the Sabbath, he or she was sentenced to death. It all had the effect of keeping the nation moral, at least for a while. In the end it failed, but it kept Israel in existence unlike the Canaanites who became so vile they had to be destroyed.

The law also threatened severe chastening if it were not kept. At one stage Israel was exiled until they were cured of idolatry. ‘If at that time you return to the LORD your God...’, said Deuteronomy 30, ‘then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes ...’ The law was added because of the transgressions of the nation. It kept the nation up to a certain level of morality. It failed to give new birth, but it did not fail to do everything. For centuries it succeeded in keeping the nation in existence.

The law is not for the righteous person. ^{□1} Mostly it is not a good guide to high spirituality. It does not convict of sin! But it was given ‘on account of transgressions’ and if it is upheld it restrains the sinfulness of men and women. The law was not for the righteous; it was for the wicked. The family of Abraham did not need it. The nation of Israel did need it.

3. The law was temporary. ‘It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made’. The ‘seed’ was Jesus. The law was given to God’s people Israel until the time of the coming of Jesus. After that God’s true Israel – Jewish believers with believing gentiles joining them – would not need to be under the Mosaic law. The law was temporary.

4. The law was inferior. Paul goes on to say, ‘And it was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator’. ^{□1} The mediator was Moses. The point here is that God did not give His law directly to His people. The ‘appearances’ of cloud, trumpet, thunder, lightning and smoke in Exodus 19:9, 16, 18, were produced by angels. ^{□2} The law was given from God to the angels, and then from the angels to Moses, and from Moses to the people. But with the gospel, God came in His Son

□1 3:19a

□2 3:19b

□1 1 Timothy 1

□1 3:19c

□2 see also Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2

• **The mediator did not receive the law directly from God – unlike the gospel**

• **The law was good for preserving the nation**

• **But useless as a means of salvation**

We die to the law because it is incapable of giving salvation

the Lord Jesus Christ. There was no mediator except God's divine Son. Verse 20 is difficult to understand. It seems that it explains verse 19c a little more. 'Now the mediator is not a mediator of one; but God is one'.³ The interpretation of this is debated. Personally, I think it is emphasizing the point that the law did not come directly from God. 'The mediator [Moses] was not receiving the law from one party but from two. The law came (i) from the angels who got it (ii) from God. But in the case of the gospel, Jesus is the mediator and He was directly sent by God alone to be the Saviour. The mediator did not receive the law from only one link in the chain, but God is one and so the gospel comes through a mediator, Jesus, from God alone. Paul is stressing the inferiority of the law, following up verse 19.

'Is the law then against the promises of God?'.¹ If the law is inferior and is no part of the gospel, and if the Christian has to be free from it, does this mean that the law of God is an enemy of the gospel? Is the law wholly evil? Is it from the devil? The answer is: **Certainly not!** The law is wholly good. It truly comes from God. Is it against the promises? The law was doing something entirely good in preserving the nation of Israel, for salvation would eventually come through Israel's Saviour. The whole law given in the days of Moses was part of God's plan and purpose. It does not come from Satan; it comes from God. But it is quite useless as a means of salvation. It cannot give life, as Paul goes on to explain. The law was not **wicked** but it was **temporary**. 'For if there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law'.² God is not against His law. The reason we have to 'die' to the law is not because it is evil, but because it is incapable of giving us salvation. As Luther says, 'The apostle is speaking about the entire Law.'¹

No law whatever can make alive but can only kill. Therefore my works do not justify me in the sight of God; they only establish me as a sinner. They do not placate the wrath of God; they arouse it. They do not achieve righteousness; they remove it. They do not make me alive; they slay me. Not even God's law makes alive; it has precisely the opposite effect.

5. Shuts every door except one

• **Faith in Christ is the only possibility**

• **Now Christ has come – the law is no longer needed**

5. The law shuts every doorway except the doorway of faith in Christ. 'But the scripture has imprisoned the entire human race under sin, in order that the promise that comes by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe'.¹ The gentiles were obviously sinners. The law of God was not given to them. The Jews were given the Mosaic law, but they could not be given any true spiritual help by the system of Mosaic laws. So this means that there was no help to be found anywhere. If even God's holy law could not give any help, what hope of salvation was there? Paul has the answer.

Every possibility of salvation is shut off except one. The only possibility is that Christ should be the faithful Saviour and that we should put our faith in the faithful Saviour. Christ alone is the Saviour. He needs no help. Outside of Christ there is nothing but hopelessness, guilt, death, alienation. The law cannot give us any help in any of these things.

This system of law was to last only until the coming of the child to whom God's promise was made. Now that Christ has come, no one needs God's Mosaic law. We have Jesus and Jesus is enough!

Note

I extract and abridge some words of Martin Luther concerning Galatians 3:22. See *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Luther's Works*, vol. 26 (ed. J.J. Pelikan, etc., Concordia Publishing House).

3:20

3:21a

3:21

3:22



Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible* (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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