

The Road *to* Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 3:21–25; Lev. 18:5; Rom. 3:9–19; 1 Cor. 9:20; Rom. 3:1, 2; 8:1–4.*

Memory Text: “Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (*Galatians 3:22, NKJV*).

Homing pigeons long have been known for their ability to fly hundreds of miles a day and arrive at their destination with amazing accuracy. Yet, even the best homing pigeons at times have become disoriented, never returning to their starting point. The worst incident happened in England, when about twenty thousand birds (valued at more than six hundred thousand dollars) never came back to their lofts.

As most of us have experienced in one way or another, being disoriented or lost is not enjoyable. It fills us with fear and anxiety; it can even lead us to moments of panic.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. Even after we accept Christ, we can get lost, or disoriented, even to the point of never returning to the Lord.

The good news, however, is that God has not left us to ourselves. He has mapped out the road to faith, as revealed in the gospel, and that path includes the law. Many people try to separate the law from the gospel; some even see them as contradictory. Not only is this view wrong, it can have tragic consequences. Without the law, we would *have* no gospel. It's hard, really, to understand the gospel without the law.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 12.

The Law and the Promise

“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?” (*Gal. 3:21, ESV*).

Sensing that his comments might lead his opponents to conclude he had a disparaging view of the law or that his comments about the priority of God’s promises were just a veiled put-down of Moses and the torah, Paul asks the very question they were thinking: “Are you saying the law contradicts the promises of God?” To this Paul responds with an emphatic “No!” Such a conclusion is impossible, because God is not opposed to Himself. God gave both the promise and the law. The law is not at odds with the promise. The two merely have different roles and functions in God’s overall plan of salvation.

What mistaken concepts did Paul’s opponents have about the role of the law? (*Compare Gal. 3:21, Lev. 18:5, and Deut. 6:24.*)

These people believed that the law was able to give them spiritual life. Their views probably arose out of a mistaken interpretation of Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 6:24, in which the law directs how life should be lived by those abiding in God’s covenant. The law did regulate life *within* the covenant, but they concluded that the law was the source of a person’s relationship with God. The Bible is clear, however, that the ability to “make alive” is a power exercised by God and His Spirit alone (*2 Kings 5:7, Neh. 9:6, John 5:21, Rom. 4:17*). The law cannot make anyone alive spiritually. This does not mean, however, that the law is opposed to God’s promise.

Seeking to prove the inability of the law to give life, Paul writes in Galatians 3:22, “Scripture has confined all under sin” (*ESV*). In Romans 3:9–19, Paul draws from a string of verses extracted from the Old Testament to show just how bad we are. The passages are not strung together in a haphazard manner. He begins with the heart of the sin problem—the selfish attitude that plagues human hearts—and then moves to verses that describe sin’s pervasiveness and universality.

His point? Because of the extent of sin and the limitations of the law, the promise of eternal life can come to us only through the faithfulness of Christ in our behalf. Here, again, is the great truth that propelled the Protestant Reformation.

Though the law cannot save us, what great benefits does our adherence to it have for us? That is, what practical good have you experienced in your own life through obedience to God’s law?

“Kept Under Law”

In Galatians 3:23, Paul writes that “before faith came, we were kept under the law.” By “we,” Paul is referring to the Jewish believers in the Galatian churches. They are the ones acquainted with the law, and Paul has been speaking to them in particular since Galatians 2:15. This can be seen in the contrast between the “we” in Galatians 3:23 and the “you” in Galatians 3:26 (*ESV*).

Galatians 3:23 reads, “Before faith came”; but in the literal Greek it reads, “before *the* faith came.” Because Paul is contrasting the place of the law before and after Christ (*Gal. 3:24*), “the faith” is most likely a reference to Jesus Himself and not a reference to Christian faith in general.

Paul says the Jews were kept “under the law” before the coming of Christ. What does he mean by “under the law”? (*Compare Gal. 3:22, 23 with Rom. 6:14, 15; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 4:4, 5, 21; 5:18.*)

Paul uses the phrase “under the law” 12 times in his letters. Depending on its context, it can have a couple of different connotations.

1. “Under the law” as an alternative way of salvation (*Gal. 4:21*). The opponents in Galatia were trying to gain life-giving righteousness by obedience. However, as Paul has already made clear, this is impossible (*Gal. 3:21, 22*). Paul later will even point out that, by desiring to be under the law, the Galatians were really rejecting Christ (*Gal. 5:2–4*).

2. “Under the law” in the sense of being under its condemnation (*Rom. 6:14, 15*). Because the law cannot atone for sin, the violation of its demands ultimately results in condemnation. This is the condition in which all human beings find themselves. The law acts as a prison warden, locking up all who have violated it and brought upon themselves the sentence of death. As we will see in tomorrow’s lesson, the use of the word *guard* (*Gal. 3:23, NKJV*) indicates that this is what Paul means by “under the law” in this passage.

A related Greek word, *ennomos*, normally translated “under the law,” literally means “within the law” and refers to living within the requirements of the law through union with Christ (*1 Cor. 9:21*). By “the works of the law,” that is, by trying to keep the law apart from Christ, it is impossible to be justified, because only those who through faith are righteous will live (*Gal. 3:11*). This truth doesn’t nullify the law; it shows only that the law can’t give us eternal life. It’s way too late for that.

The Law as Our “Guard”

Paul gives two basic conclusions about the law: (1) the law does not nullify or abolish God’s promise made to Abraham (*Gal. 3:15–20*); (2) the law is not opposed to the promise (*Gal. 3:21, 22*).

What role does the law actually play then? Paul writes that it was added “because of transgressions” (*Gal. 3:19*), and he expands on this idea using three different words or phrases in connection to the law: *kept* (*Gal. 3:23*), *shut up* (*Gal. 3:23*), and *schoolmaster* (*Gal. 3:24*).

Read prayerfully and carefully Galatians 3:19–24. What is Paul saying about the law?

Most modern translations interpret Paul’s comments about the law in Galatians 3:19 in wholly negative terms. But the original Greek is not nearly so one-sided. The Greek word translated as “kept” (*Gal. 3:23*) literally means “to guard.” Although it can be used in a negative sense, as to “hold in subjection” or to “watch over” (*2 Cor. 11:32*), in the New Testament it generally has a more positive sense of “protecting” or “keeping” (*Phil. 4:7, 1 Pet. 1:5*). The same is true of the word translated as “shut up” (*Gal. 3:23*). It can be translated “to close” (*Gen. 20:18*), “to shut” (*Exod. 14:3, Josh. 6:1, Jer. 13:19*), “to enclose” (*Luke 5:6*), or “to confine” (*Rom. 11:32*). As these examples indicate, depending on its context, this word can have either positive or negative connotations.

What benefits did the law (moral and ceremonial) provide the children of Israel? *Rom. 3:1, 2; Deut. 7:12–24; Lev. 18:20–30*.

While Paul can speak about the law in negative terms (*Rom. 7:6, Gal. 2:19*), he also has many positive things to say about it (see *Rom. 7:12, 14; 8:3, 4; 13:8*). The law was not a curse that God placed upon Israel. On the contrary, it was intended to be a blessing. Though its sacrificial system could not ultimately remove sin, it pointed to the promised Messiah who could, and its laws guiding human behavior protected Israel from many of the vices that plagued other ancient civilizations. In light of Paul’s positive comments about the law elsewhere, it would be a mistake to understand his comments here in a completely negative way.

Think of something good that is misused. For example, a drug created to treat a disease could be used by some people to get high. What examples have you seen in your own life of this principle? How does our knowledge of the fact that something good can be misused help us understand what Paul is dealing with here?

The Law as Our Schoolmaster

In Galatians 3:23, Paul describes the law as a guarding and protecting force. To what does he liken it in verse 24, and what does that mean?

The word translated as “schoolmaster” (*KJV*) comes from the Greek word *paidagogos*. Some versions translate it as “disciplinarian” (*NRSV*), “tutor” (*NKJV*), or even “guardian” (*ESV*), but no single word fully can encompass its meaning. The *paidagogos* was a slave in Roman society who was placed in a position of authority over his master’s sons from the time they turned six or seven until they reached maturity. In addition to providing for his charges’ physical needs, such as drawing their bath, providing them with food and clothes, and protecting them from any danger, the *paidagogos* also was responsible for making sure the master’s sons went to school and did their homework. In addition, he was expected not only to teach and practice moral virtues but also to ensure that the boys learned and practiced the virtues themselves.

Though some *pedagogues* must certainly have been kind as well as loved by their wards, the dominant description of them in ancient literature is as strict disciplinarians. They ensured obedience not only through harsh threats and rebukes but also by whipping and caning.

Paul’s description of the law as a pedagogue further clarifies his understanding of the role of the law. The law was added to point out sin and provide instruction. The very nature of this task means that the law also has a negative aspect, and that’s because it rebukes and condemns us as sinners. Yet, God uses even this “negative” aspect for our benefit, because the condemnation that the law brings is what drives us to Christ. Thus, the law and the gospel are not contradictory. God designed them to work together for our salvation.

“In this Scripture [Gal. 3:24], the Holy Spirit through the apostle is speaking especially of the moral law. The law reveals sin to us, and causes us to feel our need of Christ and to flee unto Him for pardon and peace by exercising repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 234.

When was the last time you compared your actions and words and thoughts to the law? Do it now, comparing them not just to the letter of the law but to the spirit, as well (*Matt. 5:28, Rom. 7:6*). How well do you fare? What does your answer tell you about Paul’s point in this epistle?

The Law and the Believer (*Gal. 3:25*)

Many have interpreted Paul's comment in Galatians 3:25 as a complete dismissal of the law. This makes little sense, however, in light of Paul's positive comments about the law elsewhere in the Bible.

What does he mean then?

First, we are no longer under the law's condemnation (*Rom. 8:3*). As believers, we are in Christ and enjoying the privilege of being under grace (*Rom. 6:14, 15*). This gives us the liberty of serving Christ wholeheartedly, without fear of being condemned for mistakes we might make in the process. This is what true freedom in the gospel is. This freedom is something radically different from no longer having to obey the law at all—which is what some people claim is “freedom” in Christ. But disobedience to the law, instead, is sin—and sin is anything but freedom (*John 8:34*).

Read Romans 8:1–3. What does it mean to be no longer condemned by the law? How should this wonderful truth impact how we live?

As a result of being forgiven through Christ, our relationship to the law is now different. We are now called to live a life that is pleasing to Him (*1 Thess. 4:1*); Paul refers to this as being led by the Spirit (*Gal. 5:18*). This does not mean that the moral law is no longer applicable—that was never the issue. How could it be when we have seen so clearly that the law is what defines sin?

Instead, because the law is a transcript of God's character, by obeying the law we simply reflect His character. But more than that, we follow not just a set of rules but the example of Jesus, who does for us what the law itself could never do: He writes the law on our hearts (*Heb. 8:10*) and makes it possible for the righteous requirement of the law to be fulfilled in us (*Rom. 8:4*). That is, through our relationship with Jesus, we have the power to obey the law as never before.

Read Romans 8:4. What is Paul saying here? How have you seen this promise manifested in your own life? At the same time, despite whatever positive changes you have experienced, why must salvation always be based on what Christ has done for us and nothing else?

Further Thought: “I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: Both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments.

“Christ was the foundation of the whole Jewish economy. The death of Abel was in consequence of Cain’s refusing to accept God’s plan in the school of obedience to be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ typified by the sacrificial offerings pointing to Christ. Cain refused the shedding of blood which symbolized the blood of Christ to be shed for the world. This whole ceremony was prepared by God, and Christ became the foundation of the whole system. This is the beginning of its work as the schoolmaster to bring sinful human agents to a consideration of Christ the Foundation of the whole Jewish economy.

“All who did service in connection with the sanctuary were being educated constantly in regard to the intervention of Christ in behalf of the human race. This service was designed to create in every heart a love for the law of God, which is the law of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 233.

“The law of ten commandments is not to be looked upon as much from the prohibitory side, as from the mercy side. Its prohibitions are the sure guarantee of happiness in obedience. As received in Christ, it works in us the purity of character that will bring joy to us through eternal ages. To the obedient it is a wall of protection.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 235.

Discussion Questions:

① We often struggle with the question of how we can overcome sin in our lives. What promises do we have in the Bible about victory over sin? How can we better position ourselves to help make these promises real? At the same time, why must we be so careful to make sure that we place our full hope of salvation not on whatever victories we get but on Christ’s victory for us?

② We often hear Christians claim that the law has been done away with. Of course, these same Christians will speak out against sin, which means, of course, that they really don’t mean the law is done away with. What, in fact, do they really mean by that claim? (Hint: In the context of what commandment does that claim usually arise?)

Summary: The law was given to point sinners to their need of Christ. As a custodian, it provides instruction about God and protection from evil. But like a disciplinarian, it also points out our sinfulness and brings condemnation. Christ frees us from the law’s condemnation and writes His law upon our hearts.