

Galatians 3:15-22

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[0 : 00] A few years ago, a New York-based journalist called A.J. Jacobs, there's a clue in the name, he obviously comes from a Jewish background, decided to try what he then entitled My Year of Living Biblically.

In his own words, it was my quest to live the ultimate biblical life, to follow every single rule in the Bible as literally as possible. Not just the famous ones like Love Thy Neighbour, but also the hundreds of oft-ignored ones.

Do not wear clothes of mixed fibres, do not shave your beard, stone adulterants. Now, as a journalist living in New York, of course he gets lots of laughs out of his experiment.

And lots of people like to ridicule the Bible, don't they? Ridicule the Old Testament particularly. Just full of rules, rules, rules, as that financial science columnist put. Or people will mock the idea of many ideas in the Bible.

So you don't eat pork. So you don't eat shellfish. So you don't wear mixed fabric clothes. They like to mock those ideas. Why do they do it?

[1 : 05] Partly because they like to mock God and mock religion. But also because they don't actually understand what those things are there for. And that's why Paul is writing here. In Galatia, in this part of Turkey, some false teachers had come in.

Telling these new Christians that what they had to do was obey all those Old Testament laws. That that was a true sign of belonging to God. They really wanted to get God's blessing.

They had to keep the law God had given Israel. But Paul is saying, no, you have missed the point. All of that was pointing forward. The Bible. But what sort of book is the Bible?

If I was to ask you, what sort of book is the Bible? What would you say? See, some people would say it's a rule book. Some people might say it's an ethical guide for living. Some people might say it's just made up.

But Paul here is telling us the truth. The Bible is the story of God's promise. It's the story of God's unfolding promise. It was actually a promise to give life and blessing to all the nations of the earth.

[2 : 10] So Paul is saying, remember that promise. And the way to receive that promise is to keep believing in Jesus Christ. In order to receive God's promised blessing. So that's the heart of the argument here.

Now let's kind of unpack it and dive in. You can almost hear the people who Paul's writing to complaining. Say, hang on Paul. What about all these rules? What about those teachers who are coming in and saying, look, God gave Abraham a promise.

Then later on in history he gave a bunch of laws through Moses. Surely the law comes second. So the law, those rules about the clothes you wear and the food you eat.

Surely that is more important. Surely we need to keep God's law to get God's blessing. That's not what Paul says. It's his argument, verse 15. To give a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant or a will, no one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified.

Paul's argument is that the covenant, the promises, the relationship God had entered into with Abraham, the great promise he'd made Abraham, was not superseded by what came later.

[3 : 20] If human beings don't just go back on their word, God certainly will not. Now what was that promise? Well that promise was that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants.

You can see that if you look down and say it here specifically. Let's go into this question anyway.

What is God's blessing? A number of times in these verses, before and after the verses we've read, Paul talks about the blessing.

So back in verse 8 of chapter 3, he talks about the blessing. You all nations shall be blessed. That was God's promise to Abraham, verse 8.

He goes on. In verse 14, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so they might receive the promised Holy Spirit. So the blessing is to be accepted by God, to receive the gift of his Spirit. But the blessing also is an inheritance, he says, verse 18. An inheritance comes by promise. God had promised Abraham a land. In the New Testament we understand more, it's not just a piece of real estate in the Middle East.

[4 : 31] But actually it's a whole new creation. Where death and mourning and crying or pain are all things that have gone away. That's why in verse 21, Paul can talk about this promise as being a promise of life.

This is what God had promised. This is the blessing God had promised. To be accepted by him. To be given his Holy Spirit to live a new life. To have an inheritance, a new world to look forward to. And to have life and righteousness. The way life was meant to be. All this is the blessing God has promised. The key word there is promise. It's always God's purpose to bless people through his promise.

Now there's a big difference between receiving something that's promised and earning something as a wage, isn't there? There's a big difference between receiving something that's promised and earning a wage.

Let me try to illustrate it like this. Imagine you had a great uncle Ron. I don't know if you do have a great uncle Ron, but just imagine for anything you do. And he's actually a very wealthy man.

[5 : 39] He's getting quite old. And he sends this message to you. He says, I promise to give you 10 million pounds when I die. Come and meet me to sign the documents.

How will you receive what he's promised? All you've got to do is believe him. And the way you show you believe him is to go and meet him as he suggested and sign the piece of paper. See, that's what it's like to receive something by promise.

When he dies, then you get 10 million pounds. However, if your uncle Ron sent you a message saying, I promise to give you 10 million pounds when I die.

To get it, you need to come and live with me as my carer and look after me and nurse me until I die. Well, that would be a whole different ballgame, wouldn't it? Then you'd have to go.

You'd have to look after your uncle Ron. You'd have to feed him his meals, clothe him, dress him, wash him. As his health deteriorated. Do whatever it is. And as you know that is a condition, you'd only get the money if you looked after him.

[6 : 45] You'd never really feel secure in it, would you? You need to keep working hard to make sure you've done enough. You might always worry that one day he might wake up and think, you know what, this isn't working. I'm going to fire this carer and get a new one.

You see the difference between getting something, receiving something as a promise, and earning something as a wage. There's a huge difference. There's a huge difference. And that is the difference that Paul is getting at here.

It's the difference between receiving what God has promised, and trying to earn it, trying to do enough to get the blessing that God has mentioned. So you see, this promise that God gives, is a promise that can give us glory and security, because it comes from God.

It's a promise of the things we really need. A promise of being accepted by God. Of being made new, receiving the Holy Spirit. The promise of having a new hope. An inheritance to look forward to. A world where there is no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain. And that gives us security and joy. Now that's what the promise is. Now the people in Paul's day, the false teachers who are disrupting these Christians, are saying, well hang on, that promise is for Abraham's offspring.

[8 : 05] Now that promise is for Israelites. For people who obey the law. For people who follow all the Jewish traditions. Paul says, no, they've got it wrong.

Look at verse 16. Who is the promise for? Now the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. It does not say, and to offsprings, referring to many.

But referring to one. To your offspring, who is Christ. Now the word offspring in the original language, in the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Like the English word, offspring, or sheep. Could actually refer to one or to many people. Paul says, no, actually it refers to one. It refers to one specific person.

To whom God, through whom, God will fulfill this great promise. Of blessing all nations. And that person is Christ. That person is Jesus Christ.

[9 : 02] This God-man who came to live. What are generations like offspring? There's a different word for generations. So offspring, literally in the original language, is seed.

So it would normally refer to a child or to the children of many. So it can be either. There are slightly dull technical reasons, which I can go into later if you want.

Why in Genesis chapter 22 verses 17 and 18. It refers to plural, many. In one part of the verse. Then refers to a singular seed after.

So in actual fact. If you want to look it up later. I'm also using it. I just want to have a quick question. Sure. It doesn't mention much about Joseph. No. Why is that? That's too long a question for your answer now.

But I can make time and have a coffee with you or something. I've got to go. So I've got an appointment for the job. Okay. Because Joseph, do you mean Joseph as in the father of Jesus? Okay. He's really not terribly important to the story.

[9 : 58] The only reason he's important is that he was descended from King David. Which shows that Jesus, being part of Joseph's family. Of course Joseph was only Jesus' stepfather. Not physical father. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Is not so important. So there's a carry. So yeah. Drop me an email if you want to. EveningLaunchTimeTalks at gmail.com. Okay. We can talk further.

When is next time? Next Tuesday, same time. We're here every Tuesday. If you give David a back, your email address, I can email you. Can you buy some people in the shops? You can.

Feel free to take it with you. We can talk about it later. That's right. I'll wait for you. Please do. Great to meet you. So what was your name? Just so I'm remembered for next week. Mark. Mark. Please meet you. Mark. I'm Stuart. So God had promised to Abraham that for one of his descendants he would bring this blessing to all the nations.

The Bible is a story of God's promise. A promise he makes right back in the beginning that unfolds. But it never changes. It just becomes clearer and clearer.

[11 : 01] I don't know if you ever used to develop photographs. The old days we used to develop photographs. Not just have digital ones. I remember my brothers used to do this in a dark room at home. He saw it from something that was very unclear.

And gradually the chemicals did their work. So it became clearer and clearer. And that is the story of the Bible. God makes this promise. It becomes clearer and clearer. As time goes on.

This promise is realized through Jesus Christ. So here's Paul's first big point here. Here's Paul's first big point. God's unchanging promise is fulfilled in Christ.

God's unchanging promise is fulfilled in Christ. But that then brings a question. For all these good Jewish people who have been obeying the law all their lives. So why then the law?

Paul even asks that question himself, doesn't he? Look down at verse 19. Why then the law? Why did God through Moses give all these laws to the people? Why are they there?

[11 : 58] How are they not relevant? How do they fit in with this promise? And Paul's answer in verse 19 is the law serves God's promise. By sending us to Christ.

The law serves God's promise by sending us to Christ. So the first thing he said was that God's unchanging promise is fulfilled in Christ. The second thing he wants us to see is that the law serves God's purpose by sending us to Christ.

And he tells us several ways in which this Old Testament law was temporary. Or was limited. So verse 19, first of all, it was limited in time. It was, the law was added until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made.

So the law was only relevant, the law of Moses was only relevant until Jesus came. It was temporary in its significance. You know, we sometimes get temporary traffic lights on our roads, don't we?

When roadways are carried out. And we know we have to stop at those traffic lights while they're there. And then a few months later the traffic lights will go. It's very temporary. We'd be idiots to stop where the traffic lights used to be, wouldn't we?

[13 : 07] And they'd be taken away. Because they were temporary. They were only there for a short time. So it is with the law of Moses. It was there until Jesus came. It's also limited in time.

It's limited in significance. It was inferior. Look at the rest of verses 19 and 20. A complicated sentence here, but bear with me. Paul goes on to say, It was put in place through angels and an intermediary.

Now, intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. One of the commentaries I read told me that there are over 250 explanations through church history.

That's what that verse means. So this may not be definitive. But the basic point here is that God sent representatives. If you read back to Exodus, the people of Israel said, We can't listen to God, Exodus chapter 19.

We will die. God said, You're right. So he gave the law to Moses, and Moses passed it on to the people. Deuteronomy 33 hints that angels were there as well.

[14:13] So they're intermediaries. That means it's less significant. What is most significant is when God turns up in person, in the person of Jesus Christ, to give us his good news message.

So the law is less significant. It's only pointing to Christ, because it's limited in time, it's limited in its significance. And thirdly, it's limited in its effectiveness. Verse 21.

Is the law contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. What Paul's saying here is, if a law, if a set of rules could be given, which we as human beings could actually keep and fulfil, so that we could gain life, then we wouldn't need Jesus.

We wouldn't need Jesus. But the law was limited in effectiveness, because it could not, it cannot change hearts. It cannot change hearts. Rules never change hearts, do they?

The government can make whatever rules it likes, outlawing certain drugs that can't be sold over the counter, doesn't change the human heart. We have laws about drink driving, it doesn't change the human heart.

[15:28] We can make rules for our children, about what is acceptable and what isn't, but it doesn't change their hearts. See, law is limited in time, limited in significance, limited in effectiveness.

And so Paul's point in verse 22, is the law does not supplant the promise of God, rather it serves the promise of God. Look at verse 22. The scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

See, how does the law serve the promise of God? The law serves the promise, by sending us to Christ. We are imprisoned under sin, in that we cannot be the people the law tells us we should be. We cannot be perfect. We cannot be good enough. We cannot do anything, to reach God's standards, or to please God, or to buy his favour. That's why Paul says back in verse 19, the law exposes our sin.

Verse 19, the law was added because of transgressions. So the law exposes our sin, it shows us we are law breakers. A few years ago, on New Year's Day, many years ago now, I was driving back to my parents' house in the Scottish Borders, and I thought I was driving perfectly well, and I thought my car was fine.

[16:49] And I noticed police flashing lights behind me, and a siren going on. So I had to pull in, and I looked in all innocence at the officer, as I wound down my window.

He said, do you know why I stopped you, sir? I said, no, because I was debating the speed limit, and I thought everything was fine. And he said, well, we were driving towards you, I saw a headlight was out.

So he thought we'd come and tell you. As we were driving behind you, we saw one of your brake lights was out. And do you know what temperature is out here, sir? I said, no. I said, probably about freezing. He said, it's minus 10 degrees.

This was the Scottish Borders of New Year. You are not driving in a way commensurate with the road conditions. See what the law had done? The law had shown me that I was a transgressor, that I was breaking rules I didn't know I was breaking.

That I was not living in a way appropriate to God's world. And that's what the law, the law of the Bible does. It exposes our sin, it exposes the fact we're lawbreakers.

[17:47] And so it sends us to Christ. And secondly, verse 22, it imprisons us. It takes us prisoner because we can't get out. We can't do enough to obey it, to get out of a trap.

It shows us we need a rescuer. It shows us we need a rescuer. And so it points us to Christ. It points us to Christ. See, God's promise is fulfilled in Christ.

And the law of God serves that promise by sending us to Christ, showing us we are sinners in need of rescue, trapping us so we know we cannot obey enough, we cannot get out.

Rules will not change hearts. We are all by nature rebels. We can try and outlaw racism. We can outlaw hate crimes.

We can put sugar taxes on sugary drinks. None of these things will solve the problems of obesity or racism or hate crime. Because we need a deeper cure.

[18 : 50] We need something to cure the human heart. So how then should we use the law? If the Bible is not rules, rules, rules, then what do we do with the laws in the Bible? Well, let me say this.

The law does not define our relationship with God. Rather, it drives us to Christ by exposing our sin. So every time we find we have failed, every time we find sin in our own lives, we go back to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness.

As we read the very first commandment of the law of Moses, Exodus chapter 20, you shall have no gods before me. I know about you, but I become so aware of the things I've lived for, where I've looked for my security, whether it's in money or other people's praise, instead of in God.

Or where I find my identity in my work rather than in Christ. Or where my ambitions are shaped by what looks good to the world. Or when I let the world's definition of happiness coming from material possessions of financial security.

When I let those things dominate, that I'm not, that I'm worshipping something other than God.

What do I need to do at that point? I cannot change myself.

[20 : 10] I go back to Christ. I go back to believing that great promise that he has taken all my sin on the cross. I believe in him and receive the life he promises.

And that is a daily thing. It's not just the start of the Christian life, it's every day of the Christian life. And that is why the gospel of grace is such good news. Because it's not about my performance or your performance.

It's not about how many rules we've kept. It's about trusting in the gracious saviour Jesus. Without this great promise of God, we despair, wouldn't we?

We would despair. We can be tempted to despair by our own failings. We can be tempted to despair when we find things in our lives that we cannot change.

Either that or we can be tempted to pride. If we think it's all about law then we think how good we've been. We either think how bad we've been because we can't keep the law or we think actually we're pretty good because we've done certain things.

[21 : 15] Either way we may not be pride or despair. Yet none of those things help us. None of those things help us. Because God has promised us life in Christ.

God's promise is fulfilled in him. That promise of a new age dawning with the Holy Spirit in our lives. The promise of righteousness credited to us being accepted by God.

The promise of life as we get to know God now and live with him forever. The promise of an inheritance where God's people will one day live in God's place where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

So the Bible is the story of God's promise to bring his blessing to a broken world through Christ.

The law does not contradict that promise. Rather the law serves that promise because the law's purpose is to send us to Christ for forgiveness for life for hope that we may have that blessing.

Let me pray for us.