

Law and Order

Isaiah 65:1-9 | Psalm 22:19-28 | Galatians 3:23-end | Luke 8:26-39

GALATIANS 3:23-29

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

INTRODUCTION

There is this common image that most of us have, buried deep in our brains, of nuns. You can probably see it. There is a classroom in a parochial school, with young students sitting at desks in little rows, hands out. The nun paces the room, drilling the students on the finer points of grammar. If a student answers incorrectly: whack. The nun smacks the student's knuckles with a ruler. If a student becomes disruptive: whack—another smack of the ruler. It's a pervasive image. I did a decent amount of research this last week trying to pinpoint the origin of this stereotype—but I could not find it. From people reminiscing about their childhood experiences of this sort to depictions in literature and on film for generations, notably in the late 1960s and the 1970s, it is a common enough image that we all know it.

It is also a fascinating image, evoking a sense of rigid, even overbearing, discipline. The rules prevail. And I'm sympathetic—having been someone who has dabbled in English most of my life, grammar is important. But how helpful, exactly, is that smack of the ruler? What, precisely, is the point of this practice? It raises a question about the nature of the rules, of discipline and punishment, and what it means to live according to such rules. And in our Galatians reading, we find ourselves at the end of a discussion that is exploring this very idea, the purpose of rules and discipline—the purpose of the law—and how it plays out in our lives. And we will come to see: *Paul would urge us to live by faith according to a promise and not under the burden of the law.* In order to see this, we must see both the context of Paul's words here, and the contrast he offers in the two sections of our passage: life under the law, and life according to the promise. Let's take a closer look.

1. PROMISE OR THE LAW

In the verses before our passage, Paul reminds the Galatians readers of the promise to Abraham.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.¹

All the way back in Genesis 12, God promised to Abraham that he, God, would bless Abraham by multiplying his descendants, and through this, bless all the nations of the earth (translated

¹ Gal 3:8-9.

here as *Gentiles*).² It was a promise that did not demand any particular obedience. There was no law or requirement. It was simply a promise. And Abraham, in order to receive this blessing, had only to believe the promise—to have faith. And so, he did believe. And it was credited to him as righteousness.³

Paul then contrasts this with the Law. “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’”⁴ This seems to create an irreconcilable tension. If someone is made righteous, that is, they are saved and blessed through this unilateral promise from God, then they cannot also be saved by obeying all the things written in the law. For if they are saved by obedience, then it is not God’s promise that saves. It cannot be both the promise and the law. They are mutually exclusive. So, which is it? Is a person saved because they received God’s promise and believed? Or are they saved because they kept the law and lived righteously?

For Paul, the answer is simple. Nobody *can* keep the law. Not one person can observe and obey all the things written.⁵ And so our only hope of righteousness, of salvation, of being accepted by and reconciled to God—who demands such perfection—comes through the gospel. Christ became the curse, the one who took the righteous wrath of God directed at us for our inability to live perfect lives. He died on the cross so that we might live—and live by faith that God will keep his promise of salvation and blessing to his people. The law never could save us.

Of course, this prompts an inevitable question: What exactly is the function of the law, then? If we were never going to be saved through obedience to the law, why did God give it to us?

2. LIFE UNDER THE LAW

This is where our passage picks up the thread. The law was there to constrain us. In the first couple verses there, Paul uses two different words and a powerful image to describe the effects of the law. Before faith, confronted by the requirement of the law to live perfect lives the law *imprisoned* and *guarded* us—because we cannot live perfect lives. The first of those words—*imprisoned*—is the normal word for being kept under military restraint. The law held us like the Roman army held prisoners. The second word—*guarded*—is something more like *enclosed*. The law caught us in a net.⁶ And if these similes were not vivid enough, Paul adds the image of a disciplinarian, a tutor, a hired overseer whose sole job was to joylessly make sure the rules were enforced. This is the proverbial nun with the ruler smacking the knuckles of unruly children.

Life under the law was one of following the rules, being confined by them, always fearing being reprimanded or punished for breaking them. It was a life of bleakness, always aware of your failures and yet always feeling constrained, imprisoned by a legal and moral system of behaviour that one could never hope to satisfy. It was a life of hopelessly trying to meet standards that are not quite achievable, yet having nothing but these rules to guide you.

² Gen 12:2-3.

³ Gal 3:7 and Gen 15:6. Cf. Rom 3:30 and 4:3-25.

⁴ Gal 3:10. Cf. Deut 27:26.

⁵ See Rom 3:9-20.

⁶ This is how the word is used in Luke 5:6, for example.

3. LIFE BEYOND THE LAW

This picture Paul has painted is then contrasted in the rest of the passage. Verse 25 introduces this contrast with an adversative conjunction: “*But now that faith has come...*”⁷ Once we realize that the promise was made by God and it does not depend on our keeping the law—but simply believe the promise, life can be quite different. Life is in Jesus Christ... and this has profound implications. Here, Paul enumerates three:

First, it is freedom. We are no longer under the strict gaze and imposing rule of the disciplinarian. Being in Christ means being beyond the law. It no longer imprisons. It no longer constrains. It reminds us of our failures to keep it, but more so it reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ Jesus to satisfy its requirements through his death and resurrection. And this is freedom. This is so much more than Mel Gibson’s William Wallace crying “Freedom!” in *Braveheart*. This is real freedom: freedom from anxiety of failure, from the law, freedom from the guilt of sin and rebellion against God. For if you have faith, having taken the sign of that faith, baptism, you have been made a child of God and given freedom to live in Christ. We no longer fear the law. But we are free to live within it, not out of compulsion to be saved by it, but out love for the one who saved us from it. Freedom.

Second, it is unity, by which I mean we are all one. Paul draws on three aspects of cultural anthropology to make this point in verse 28: ethnicity, social status, and gender. In all three, for the Jewish Christian at this point in history, there is a definitive power dynamic. If life is lived according to the law, then there is an advantage to being a Jew and not a gentile, to being free rather than a slave, to being male and not a female. You might think of it as Se-mite privilege. Being born a free Jewish male had some cultural advantages that are unavoidable. And it was assumed that these translated to better access to God and the salvation he provides. But life under the promise—that’s for everyone. All the way back to Abraham, the promise of blessing was for Jew and gentile, for slave and free, and for male and female. When it comes to receiving the blessing of God through faith, receiving righteousness through the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are one and the same.

Let me pause here for a minute to say something else. This verse, verse 28, is one of the most misused verses in our culture. Paul is *not* obliterating all distinctions. As we continue to debate issues of race, status, and gender in our society, we need to see that Paul is not eliminating diversity. Different cultures continue to be different, having rich and distinct customs, expression, and ways of life. Likewise, society continues to be stratified, though it should not be abusively hierarchical. Likewise, men and women continue to be different, biologically and otherwise. And in many ways, these distinctions should be respected, protected, and even celebrated. Paul recognizes and affirms all of these distinctions elsewhere. He has not eliminated diversity here. He’s simply said that when it comes to our status before God as children of the promise, as those who live in Christ and are free from the law, we are equal.

Third, it means we receive the covenant blessing of God. If you “*belong to Christ,*” Paul says, you are not just the children of God, but the children of Abraham, which he defines as “*heirs according to the promise.*”⁸ Now, I have already said a bit about this, so I don’t need to say a lot

⁷ Gal 3:25.

⁸ Gal 3:29.

more. From our context, this means being the recipient of God's promise—his promise to bless all the people of the earth, Jew and gentile, through Abraham's offspring. And as we just saw, regardless of ethnicity, status, and gender, it is being the recipient of all that God has to offer, faith and hope in this life, righteousness before him, freedom from the law, and unimaginable blessing in the life to come.

Three implications of being in Christ rather than under the law: freedom, unity, and blessing.

CONCLUSION

What an amazing thing it is to be in Christ and no longer under the law. We simply need but accept the promise by faith. It really is that simple. And in our heads, it is an easy choice to make. Who wouldn't choose freedom over imprisonment? Who wouldn't choose unity over inequality? Who wouldn't choose ultimate blessing over a lifetime of failure? And yet, in our lives, we live like people who want to keep the rules and whose salvation depends on it. We trick ourselves into thinking that good behaviour and ticking the boxes of religion somehow translates to deserving God's blessing. But it does not. We must believe.

And then, brothers and sisters, we shall be free. Free to live according to the Spirit, as Paul writes a little later in this letter. Free to live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.⁹ And we live this way not as those earning salvation under the law, but as those free to live in Christ, enjoying life as the recipients of this great blessing.

Let us pray: *Great God in heaven, help us live according to your promise, free to follow in the way of Christ Jesus, your Son, our Lord. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁹ Gal 5:22-23.