

True Freedom: God's Permanent Promise

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[0 : 00] Well, what do you think about keeping rules when it comes to rules or when it comes to laws or any kind of regulations? Our human experience proves basically that we can't live with them and we can't live without them.

Can't live with rules, we can't live without them. There's a conflict because we don't really want our freedom to be restricted by rules. And yet at the same time, we need rules for the sake of justice. If we want society to flourish and function well, then rules are a good thing and we want them to be in place. Listen to what the late Yale law professor Arthur Leff wrote.

He said, I want to believe, and so do you, in a complete transcendent and imminent set of propositions about right and wrong. Findable rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously.

I also want to believe, and so do you, in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves individually and as a species what we ought to be.

[1 : 13] What we want is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free. That's from his book, *Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law*.

Now, when it comes to Christianity, one of the barriers that people have to believing in the Christian faith is the idea that Christianity is like some kind of straitjacket.

That there are all these rules and it would be far better without Christianity because we'd be more free rather than having to stick to all these rules or laws. And that is a notion, I guess, that so many people have when it comes to Christianity.

And maybe you're here today and that's what you think too. Christianity is about rules, it's about laws, and it will restrict my freedom if I believe in Christianity or become a Christian.

And even Christian believers can struggle to understand the place that God's law should have in our lives. What's God's law for? Why did God give the law? What role does it have in how we live?

[2 : 15] And that's really the issue that Paul tackles in this reading in Galatians 3, verse 15 through to 25. Because the focus is on the role of God's law and its purpose in our lives.

And so up until this point, the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Galatians, he's been arguing that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Not faith in Jesus plus keeping the law or keeping the rules, but we're saved by faith alone, in Christ alone.

And remember the background to the letter was that some Jewish false teachers were urging these Galatian Christians, these believers, to keep the Jewish laws, laws like circumcision, if they were going to be proper Christians.

But they were wrong. But it still raises the question that if we're not saved by the law, then why do we need it? And it's something we need to grasp because it impacts how we live our lives.

[3 : 19] It impacts how we conduct our relationships, how we spend our time, how we do our work, how we raise our children, how we use our money, how we serve other people, how we guard our hearts, and so on.

How we understand the law of God will affect how we live our lives. So what Paul does is he shows us how God's promise, the promise of the gospel given to Abraham came first, and then later came the law.

Not to change the promise that God had already given, but in order to lead us to Jesus. So the promise of the gospel given to Abraham plus the law are meant to lead us to Jesus Christ.

So both the law and the promise lead to Jesus. And so if we call ourselves a Christian, or if we're considering Christianity, then we need to see how everything God does, like giving the law, is

meant to lead us to Jesus.

And so two points to think about this afternoon. First, God's promise before the law points us to Jesus, verse 15 to 18. And then secondly, God's purpose through the law leads us to Jesus.

[4 : 34] And so we're looking really at what Paul says so we can see why it matters for us. So the first point then, God's promise before the law points us to Jesus. Paul begins with God's promise to Abraham.

That's a way back at the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis. And it's a permanent promise that can't be changed. So verse 15 says, Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life, just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established.

So it is in this case. So he's talking about a human covenant. This is not so much a business contract like you might find in the workplace, but this is more of a last will and testament.

So a will that someone might write, conscious that they're going to die and they want their inheritance to go on to somebody else. And of course, we know that a will is a legally binding document, and it can be changed once it's signed.

You always hear of so many cases in court where the will has been signed, the person has died, and then whether it's the children or somebody else, is trying to change what was written in the will.

[5 : 51] And it can't be done. And so Paul is talking here about the kind of promise that is unalterable. And he's going to argue that if human contracts, a human will, for example, will and testament, if it can't be changed, then how much more when it comes to God's promises?

They will never be changed. And so God made a promise to Abraham. And verse 16 says, the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.

Scripture does not say, and to seeds, meaning many people, but and to your seed, meaning one person who is Christ. And so what Paul is doing here is he's showing that ultimately, this promise points to Jesus Christ.

So when God made his covenant with Abraham, it involved Abraham and his seed. In other words, his children or his descendants. But God's promise wasn't made to Abraham and all his Jewish descendants because Paul points out that the word for seed, children, offspring, the word for seed here is singular and that it refers to one person.

And that one person that refers to is Jesus Christ. And so God's covenant promise to Abraham all those years ago was all about Jesus.

[7 : 16] It was pointing towards his coming and it was centered on him. Because we know from Paul's letter to the Galatians already that the way into God's family is through faith in Jesus.

And so there were no strings attached to God's promise. Abraham didn't have to do anything to inherit it. There are no laws to obey. There were no works to do. There were no conditions to be fulfilled.

God promised to give him a land and a people and a descendant who would bless the whole world. And so this was a permanent promise pointing to Jesus.

Verse 17 says, What I mean is this, the law introduced 430 years later does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.

So what Paul is doing is he's showing how God's promise came long before the law did. So the promise to Abraham came first. Then almost half a millennia, millennium later, after Abraham's death, God gave Moses the law.

[8 : 29] So promise, 430 years, then the law. So by giving the law to Moses, God didn't change his covenant promise to Abraham. Abraham because God made a covenant that could not be altered or changed.

So it wasn't as if God signed a contract with Abraham and then later added in a few extra details with Moses. In other words, God didn't announce his gospel to Abraham and then alter the terms of that gospel with Moses.

Because a promise is a promise, isn't it? It should be for you and me when we make a promise. People ought to know that we'll stick to our promise. How much more for God when God makes a promise, what he promises will happen.

That's the point Paul is making, that God's salvation comes through his promise. It doesn't come through the law. So verse 18 says, for if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise.

But God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. So it was through God's promise to Abraham that the inheritance would come. It didn't depend on the law.

[9 : 42] And so Paul is essentially reinforcing here what he's been saying all the way along in his letter to the Galatians, that we are saved by God's grace. We're not saved by the things that we do.

We're saved by God's grace towards us. And so our salvation, if we're a Christian, is all about what God does for us. And it's never about what we do for God.

Because God has already promised, he already promised his blessing before the law even existed. So grace has to do with God's promise, whereas works has to do with our performance.

So just think about how promises work. So just say, for example, that your great-aunt Agatha, or whatever your aunt is called, I don't have an aunt called Agatha, but just say your great-aunt Agatha promises to give you her \$10 million New York penthouse apartment that overlooks Central Park in New York.

And all you can do, really, is to trust your great-aunt Agatha to keep her promise. There's nothing that you can do to get that apartment. You've got to depend on her and her grace and generosity in giving it to you.

[11 : 00] You can't fulfill her promise because it's her promise. It isn't your promise. And that's what it's like when it comes to God's promise through the gospel.

Only God can fulfill it. It's his promise. So we can't get the inheritance. We can't earn our salvation through our own effort. We simply need to trust God, believing in his promise to be saved.

We don't do it. We trust his promise that he does it. And so God's promise came before the law to point people to Jesus to be saved.

So the law was never supposed to be the way of salvation. It had a different purpose. But before we consider this and go on to our second point, let's just apply this first point. Because being a Christian really means that we rely on God's promise in the gospel of Jesus Christ and not on our performance.

Being a Christian doesn't mean that you live a good life and do a lot of good things and then God will accept you. And so we shouldn't be tempted to think, therefore, that continuing as a Christian depends on my performance.

[12 : 18] Because we're not saved by all the things that we do for God, even if they're good things, like going to church or reading your Bible or having a degree in theology or using your spiritual gifts or doing lots of good deeds or whatever it may be.

God doesn't accept us because of our performance. And isn't that such a hugely liberating thing? Because if we live like God's acceptance of us does depend on our performance, it's going to either lead to pride or to despair.

It'll lead to pride because if we do more or if we perform better than other people do, then we'll feel superior because we'll look better than other people.

Or it will lead to despair if we don't perform well or even if we fail. Because then we'll feel guilty and we'll feel useless and we'll look bad compared to other people.

And so there can be no room for pride when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ and there can be no room for despair, no need for despair because it's what God does.

[13 : 29] And so just like God's promise to Abraham was dependent on God, not on Abraham, so our relationship with God is based not on our performance but on God's gracious promise.

And so that's the first thing. God's promise before the law points us to Jesus. The second thing is that God's purpose through the law leads us to Jesus, verse 19 to 25.

So the question is, in Paul's argument here, well, what is the point of the law then? If we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, why the law?

What purpose does it serve? What role does it have in our lives? If all God's blessings come through his promise, what's the law for? And it's an obvious question and probably perplexed the minds of the Gentiles that Paul writes to as well as the Jewish false teachers.

Why the law? Well, essentially, the law was not meant to save anybody but to lead us to Jesus in order to be saved.

[14 : 35] And that's why the law revealed sin until Jesus came. That's what Paul's saying in verse 19. So he says, why then was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the seed to whom the promise referred had come.

So it's not as if the law doesn't have a place in God's plan as if the law is irrelevant. The law does have a place but it was never meant to replace God's promise by inventing a new or a different way of salvation or a different way of being accepted by God.

It was added to expose our sin, to convince us of our need of salvation. So the law shows the human race, all of us, all who have ever lived, the law shows humanity how much we fail to keep God's demands, how much we fail to do what God tells us to do.

For example, a question, what do you do when you see a sign that says keep off the grass? You could do a straw poll and get you to put your hand up as to whether you would step on the grass when you see a sign that says keep off the grass.

Some of us would or whether you would actually keep off the grass because the sign told you to keep off the grass and so you keep off the grass. See, the sign is intended to keep people off the grass and so if the sign wasn't there, you would never know that you weren't supposed to do it.

[16:06] You would never know that stepping on the grass was wrong. And there's a sense in which that helps us understand what God's law does. By God giving the law, God shows us what sin is so that we know what is wrong, so we know what is right, so we know what we should do, so we know what we shouldn't do.

And so he says, and it was added until the seed to whom the promise referred had come. Remember the seed? Paul's referring to his Jesus. And so what he's saying is the law is a temporary thing and it lasted only to the coming of Jesus because Jesus is the one who can forgive the transgressions that the law exposes.

So the law comes to show up our sinful hearts, our wrong behavior, and to help us see that we need Jesus for forgiveness.

And so the law was given not to replace or to change the promise but to prepare for Jesus by revealing our sin. So we looked at the Ten Commandments over the summer in July and August to really show up what we're like as people, how far short we fall of God's perfect standards.

And that's why God gave the law, so that we could see that we can't obey it and therefore we need help. And so Paul goes on, the law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator.

[17:37] A mediator, however, implies more than one party but God is one. It's difficult knowing what Paul means here, how it fits into his overall argument, but it doesn't essentially change what he is arguing here.

And I think the best explanation seems to be that Paul is saying the law is limited and it doesn't carry the same importance as the promise. So God spoke the law through angels by a mediator. The mediator was Moses. In other words, God gave the law to the people through angels by Moses almost in a third hand kind of way.

That's the law. Whereas God spoke the promise directly to Abraham. Abraham. And yet the more Paul talks about the law and the promise, the more they seem to contradict as if they're in competition.

But what he's actually showing here is that the law and the promise are actually teammates.

They're working together to save people. And that's why Paul says that the law can't give life.

[18:46] Verse 21, is the law therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.

So Paul rejects what seems to be the logic of his arguments. The law can't contradict the promise is of God because the law can't give life.

But it was never meant to. That was never its purpose. And so the law and the promise are different, but they're complementary in God's plan of salvation.

So the law was never intended to be the way of salvation. It wasn't meant to give a relationship with God because the promise already gave that.

And Abraham is the prime example. He was justified. He was counted righteous through his faith long before the law came. So the law had a different purpose.

[19:46] And part of that purpose was to show that we are prisoners to sin. So Paul says in verse 22, but scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin so that what was promised being given through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

So the law doesn't just reveal sin and show how we fall short of God's standards. words, it shows us that we're under the power of sin and we can't save ourselves.

So do you hear the words that Paul is using there? He's saying we're locked up as prisoners of sin and we need to be set free. And so the purpose of the law is not to save us or set us free, but to highlight our sin, to highlight our slavery so that we might look to find a savior.

Let me try and illustrate. I once took my old car. It was a Nissan Micra, white, well, white besides the dirt, brown check interior, and I took it for its MOT and I wasn't very hopeful and the MOT, of course, is that annual test of whether your car is safe and roadworthy and it wasn't, so that's why I was worried and as usual, lots of things needed to be done to get it through the MOT, but the main things were a rear brake pipe and a track rod end, if that means anything to you.

And so the mechanic, he did the work, he fixed the car so the car would pass its MOT and then he gave me the certificate to prove that the car was roadworthy. So just think about this, my car was in desperate need of salvation, but it wasn't the MOT test, that fixed the problems in the car.

[21 : 42] It was the car mechanic that fixed the problems in the car. So the MOT test was important, but it was important because it showed up the issues, it showed up what needed to be done, but it couldn't solve those problems.

It was the car mechanic who needed to sort out the car so it could then pass the test. And so can you see how God gave the law, the MOT test if you like, to show up what's wrong with us to then lead us to Jesus in order to get fixed.

So the law teaches us our need of a savior and leads us to faith in him. And Paul closes with two illustrations to show this.

So the first one describes the law as a prison, verse 23. Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.

So the law keeps us locked up in the prison of sin. The law condemns us, the law punishes us, and we can't escape. So we need Jesus to set us free.

[22 : 55] And then secondly, Paul describes the law as being like a guardian that leads us to Christ. Verse 24. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

When Paul uses this word guardian, the literal word is pedagogos. So when Paul was writing, a pedagogue was a slave who had been put in charge of a child in a Greek family.

And so the closest equivalent these days I guess would be somebody like a nanny. But they had the responsibility of training and of developing the child. So the role of the pedagogue would be to supervise the child in every area of their life, to take them to school, to teach them good manners, to show them moral values, to encourage good behavior, and so on and so on.

And also disciplining the child when they stepped out of line. Because the pedagogue's job was to get the child responsible enough to get through adolescence and reach adulthood.

And so Paul is saying here that that's really the purpose of the law in God's plan of salvation. It functioned as a guardian to teach us how to live, to show up where we're wrong, so that we get to Christ.

[24 : 16] So the law tells us what to do, it punishes us for when we fail to do it, and it leads us to Jesus. So he's essentially saying the law was never meant to be the way of salvation, but the law was meant to lead us to Jesus who is the way of salvation.

Because we can only be justified by faith in Jesus, not by observing the law. And so Paul says, verse 25, now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So the law has served its purpose by leading us to Jesus Christ for our salvation. And so what's the purpose of the law then when we have faith in Jesus Christ?

Well, Paul's not saying the law has no use whatsoever, just that the law isn't required in order to be saved and accepted by God.

And so we don't obey God's law in order to be saved, but we obey because we are saved. We obey not to earn God's acceptance, but because God has already accepted us in Jesus.

[25 : 26] And so we will want to obey what God commands out of gratitude for everything he's done for us in Jesus Christ. And so the law does have a crucial place in God's plan.

God first promised the gospel of grace, and that's the story of the Bible. It's all about God's grace towards us. But then God gave the law to show the reality of our sin and our need for a Savior.

Because unless we discover the bad news about ourselves and about our sin and about our inability to do anything about it, unless we discover how hopeless and helpless we are, that's the bad news, then we'll never see why the coming of Jesus, his life, his death, and his resurrection is the good news that we need to respond to.

We won't be ready for the good news of Jesus if we're not aware of the bad news of our own sinful condition. Because if we don't think that our sin is a big problem, if we don't think that our sin separates us from a pure and perfect and holy God, and we have no right to be anywhere near his presence, if we don't recognize that or realize that, then we'll fail to see God's amazing grace in sending us his one and only son, Jesus.

So the law reveals us as we truly are, not how good we like to think we are, it shows us up for our need of Jesus.

[27 : 04] And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're here today, then the take-home message is God promises his salvation to you. you can receive it through faith in Jesus.

You don't need to do anything other than receive and put your faith in Jesus Christ. But if you have already put your faith in Jesus, then the take-home message is, well, let that faith show itself in grace-fueled obedience to all that God says that we should do.

Amen. Amen.