

Does God's Blessing Come Through the Law or by the Promise?

Gal. 3

In his book, *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell sets up the confrontation between a giant Philistine warrior and a young Israeli shepherd boy in the valley of Elah and then writes these unexpected words: *Thus began one of history's most famous battles. The giant's name was Goliath. The shepherd boy's name was David...What happens next is a matter of legend...The battle is won miraculously by an underdog who, by all expectations should not have won at all. This is the way we have told one another the story over the many centuries since. It is how the phrase "David and Goliath" has come to be embedded in our language – as a metaphor for improbable victory. And the problem with that version of the events is that almost everything about it is wrong.*¹

If you are curious about why Gladwell thinks that we've gotten the conventional interpretation of the David and Goliath story wrong, you'll have to get his book. I mention it this morning because Paul is making a similar charge in Galatians 3 about the Judaizers who have infiltrated the Galatian church. The Judaizers were Jewish teachers who claimed to be followers of Christ but brought a message of faith in Christ plus the law equals salvation. And as these Jewish teachers came to churches full of Gentile believers who were really new to this Bible thing, they seemed to back up their faith plus law message with the full weight of the Old Testament.

On Mt. Sinai God gave the Israelites the commandments through Moses and promised to bless them and be their God if they observed all that was written in the law. For thousands of years those who loved God, including all the all the great figures of the OT like Moses, and Samuel, and David, and Elijah, and so many others, kept His commandments (not perfectly, but strictly), and were blessed and accepted by God because they did. Throughout redemptive history law-keeping was the basis of relationship between God and His people and the most important component to God's acceptance of His people. Jesus didn't come to abolish that, he came to add to that. Jesus came to bring forgiveness and clean the slate so we could then start to fill the slate with from-the-heart, good ole fashioned obedience to God's law. It's these two things together – trusting Jesus and obeying the law – that pleases God and makes us acceptable in His sight. You Gentiles have started well by believing in Jesus, now you need to complete your faith by observing the dietary laws, getting circumcised, and keep the law of Moses. And, they said, that's not just us talking, that's over 1500 years of Old Testament history talking.

Paul writes to the Galatians and says, the problem with the Judaizers interpretation of the OT is *that almost everything about it is wrong*.

God's covenant with Israel was a covenant of promise, not law (vv. 1-14)

The Judaizers' point to Moses, but Paul trumps Moses with Abraham – the father of the Jewish nation, where God first made His covenant with Israel. That covenant wasn't a covenant of law; it was a covenant of promise and faith. God made sweeping promises to Abraham – promises that looked impossible to come true, and promises that Abraham had done nothing to deserve. Yet Abraham believed those promises, and God counted that faith as righteousness.

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath. Introduction*

God's covenant with Israel through Abraham was based on His promises, not man's performance. In fact, in order to seal the covenant God told Abraham to get a cow, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon, and Abraham knew what to do: he cut each animal in half and laid the halves opposite each other. The idea was that the two parties making a covenant would walk between the halves as a way of saying, "if I ever break my side of the agreement, may I be cut up and cut off. I deserve to die!" But when it came time for Abraham and God to walk through the animal halves and cut the covenant together, God put Abraham into a deep sleep and then God passed through the cut up animal pieces Himself. God cut covenant with Himself on behalf of Abraham. God's promise would not be based on Abraham's performance (because God knew Abraham would invariably break the covenant), His covenant would be based on His own promise to keep both sides of the covenant.

Two ways of seeking God's blessing

To interpret the Old Testament as teaching that God's blessing of Israel was based on their keeping the law is to get it all wrong. Look with me at verse 10 and 11. Those who rely on works of the law (obeying the law) to get God's blessing will actually be under a curse *unless they keep the law perfectly!* Because we are sinners we are unable to keep the law so no one will ever be justified before God by keeping the law. What does the OT say? Hab. 2:4 gives God's answer: *The righteous shall live by faith.* It has always been faith – that isn't new to the NT, it was how Moses and Samuel and David all related to God and how God could consider them righteous in His sight – because they believed God's promises.

Deuteronomy says that everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. In OT days they usually executed people by stoning them or running them through with a spear or sword. But if the person executed was considered to be a blasphemous person or a really wicked lawbreaker, the Israelites would take the dead body and hang it on a tree as a sign of that person's utter shame and God's utter rejection of them. They were considered cursed by God.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He took our shame upon himself. Though perfectly pure and righteous, Jesus died the death of a blasphemer and a wicked person. That's why the religious leaders would wag their heads in scorn as they passed by – Jesus claimed to be special to God and look at him – he is shameful and cursed by God. On the cross Jesus experienced God's rejection –that's why he cried out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* It was our rejection, our shame, our sin that he embraced as if it were his own. He took our curse and gave us his righteousness. Our part is to do as Abraham did and believe the promise of God. If we try to receive God's blessing by keeping the law we will end up cursed by God.

The OT isn't the story of God giving a law and expecting His people to keep it. It's the story of God giving a promise and expecting His people to believe it.

But when God gave Moses the law, did that do away with the promise? (vv. 15-18)

In verse 17 Paul addresses another question that those studying the OT could ask: *OK, maybe God began the covenant with Abraham through faith, but 430 years later when God gave Moses the law, did that do away (replace) the promise?* Speaking even from human perspective, covenants can't just be set aside once they've been ratified. That may not always be true with modern contracts but that was true of certain ancient mid-Eastern covenants.

If God changed how we receive His blessing from being based on faith to being based on law-keeping, then He would be guilty of nullifying the first covenant. What He promised Abraham would always be true, wouldn't be true anymore. It would now be our performance, not His promise that would determine whether we live in His blessing. Tim Keller writes:

A gift-promise needs only to be believed to be received, but a law-wage must be obeyed to be received.

Many people make the mistake of thinking that in the OT God's relationship with His people was based on the law, and in the NT God's relationship with His people is based on faith. The truth is that God has always based His relationship with His people on His promises and their faith. The NT simply reveals how God's promises of salvation are all fulfilled in the Person of His Son so that the focal point of all our faith is Jesus Christ.

So why did God give the law then? (vv. 19-24)

In verse 19 Paul anticipates the next question: *Why then the law?* If the law wasn't given to get God's people into right relationship with Him by keeping it, then why was it given?

Karate and throw pillows

When I was 11 years old I stumbled on one of my dad's karate instruction books. My dad actually knew some karate, and I wanted to learn it too. So I began to go through the book and practice the moves in it. They had pictures so I could see what the moves were supposed to look like, but I didn't have an instructor to tell me if what I was doing was correct or not, or a sparring partner to practice my flips, kicks, and karate chops on.

So I did the next best thing: I grabbed one of our throw pillows and I began to beat that throw pillow silly. I flipped it, chopped it, kicked it, and head butted it. In no time I felt like it was getting easier and easier to beat my sparring partner and I began to feel like I was getting pretty good. I began to walk with a certain confident swagger in my walk and only I knew why. I held my hands slightly curved – tensed and ready to spring into action should I need to defend myself. be attacked by a gang of throw pillows.

Looking back I realize that how well you can handle a pillow isn't an indicator of how you'd handle yourself in a fight - unless you are attacked by a gang of throw pillows. I was measuring myself in a way that guaranteed that I would look a lot better than I was. If I had ever sparred with someone who really knew karate, I would have quickly gotten a much better idea of my abilities.

That's why the law was given. *It was added because of transgressions...* Not to make us righteous, but to help us really see where we stood. The law was given to do two things:

1. To imprison us. *Before faith came, we were held captive under the law. (vs. 23). Vs 22 says a similar thing:* Scripture imprisoned everything under sin. The law wasn't given to make us righteous but to show us how sinful we really are. Without the law, men would have been under the illusion that they were righteous just because they compared themselves to their own standards, rather than God's. We would have rigged the game to make us look better than we really are. The law was an immovable standard of perfection that trapped us in our sinfulness so we couldn't escape the reality of how sinful we really are. John Stott wrote this about the purpose of the law:

*The purpose of the law was to lift the lid off man's respectability and disclose what he is really underneath- sinful, rebellious, guilty, under the judgment of God and helpless to save himself.*²

2. To teach us. *So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came (vs 24).* The word “guardian” means “tutor”. The law was a tutor to teach us about how we should live. It didn't give us the power to obey, but it taught us what obeying looks like. It says it was our guardian until Christ came. Now we are justified by faith, but just as when a child outgrows a tutor – or a parent's primary role as an instructor – it's not the goal for that child to throw off everything he/she learned, but to internalize the values and lessons and obey them out of their own desire to do so.

The law hasn't been thrown away, it has been written on our hearts. The Spirit of God empowers us to keep the law in a way that the law never could do. For us as believers, the moral law of God becomes a way *of* life, but not the way *to* life as the Judaizers were claiming it to be. We cannot be saved by keeping the law, but having been saved by faith in God's promises fulfilled in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us the power and the desire to obey the law.

Conclusion (vv. 25-29)

It is by faith in Christ that we become Abraham's offspring – just as he lived by faith and was counted righteous in God's sight because of his faith, so are we. And as Abraham's offspring, there is NO partiality of person: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – all who trust in Christ are one in Christ and are, verse 2 says, Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. We belong to that lineage that is blessed by God, not based on keeping the law but based on God's promise.

If you are a Christian, your relationship with God is based on His promises and your faith in those promises, not your performance. Don't try to earn God's acceptance by your performance – it's exhausting and you'll never do it. Legalism tries to turn our relationship with God into the Olympic Games: we are constantly having to score high marks to stand on the podium. Have to perform. Did you pray? Did you read the Bible? Did you fellowship? Did you witness today? Did you act unselfishly? Did you give generously? Are you caring for the poor? Are you fighting against injustice? Are you sacrificing your life for others?

But it's not just are you doing it – it's are you doing it *enough*? Yeah, you prayed, but did you pray *long* enough? Did you pray *passionately* enough? Did you intercede? Your mind didn't wander, did it? I mean – it's an endless layer after layer. You read your Bible but did you read it long enough? Are you meditating? Are you studying? Are you memorizing? OK, maybe you're praying and reading a lot, but are you witnessing? Cause it don't mean a thing unless you're witnessing! OK, maybe you're witnessing (and praying and reading) but there are people suffering from injustice or poverty – what are you doing about that? And even if you cram all that into your life on a regular basis, legalism can still condemn you for not doing ten other things you should be doing, or for not doing any of it enough or for doing it with the wrong motives. Hey, isn't there some selfishness in the way you prayed?

What's even more dangerous is that the voice of legalism can come from the other side and congratulate us for being so much better, so much more spiritual, so much more disciplined, than the poor slob next to

² John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, pg. 92-93

us. If we think we're measuring up to what God requires of us we begin to mount the podium of self-righteousness. We get impressed with ourselves. The problem is we're measuring ourselves in a way that is designed to make us look good. We're karate chopping throw pillows and thinking we're ready for the Olympics when the truth is our righteousness isn't righteousness at all.

We need to go back to what our relationship with God is based on: our faith that His promises are true. And we find grace and peace knowing that true loving relationships aren't built on performance, but the promise of unconditional love. It frees us to love and serve God, not out of duty, but from a heart overflowing with love and acceptance.

As we close, if you're tempted to move your relationship with God back to performance, let's pray together and ask God to settle this in your heart. If you are trusting in Christ as your Savior, than you are Abraham's offspring – better than that, you're God's son or daughter, and an heir according to God's unshakable promise.