

Moses, then was the 'mediator' of the Laws of God according to Jewish thought, and this is what Paul refers to (3:19).

In verses 20 and 21 Paul indicates that although the law which was mediated by Moses is not as important as the promise which has come directly from God, it is still part of God's revelation. But the law contains nothing by which anyone can be saved; he says; 'if a law had been given which had the power to give life, then righteousness would indeed originate in the law' (3:21). Indeed, Paul daringly says that Scripture itself, by which he means the Old Testament, 'has kept all things captive under the power of sin' (3:22) because it contains the written record of the law. In his mind, even Old Testament Scripture was secondary to 'faith in Jesus Christ' which was the fulfilment of God's promise of salvation.

Application

What Paul was doing throughout this passage was fighting to ensure that 'faith in Christ Jesus' remained at the heart of Christian experience and the life of the church, in the days before the New Testament existed. It was not long before the Gospels and some of his own letters would come to be regarded as the 'scriptures' of the early church, and by the fourth century the structure of the New Testament as we know it was generally agreed. The whole of the New Testament speaks of the singular importance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the primary revelation of the nature of God and the means of salvation, and the New Testament has been the standard spiritual reference book for the church from its earliest days until now. Its value, I believe, lies in its constant call to all who read it to return to faith in Jesus Christ, just as Paul preached to the churches he founded and argued in all his letters.

The greatest dangers which face the church come from those who think that religious freedom comes when the human mind is set free to explore spirituality and faith; when in truth, people are only set free when they find their humanity in their Creator through Jesus Christ. It seems paradoxical, but history shows this to be the case. Where people have been given their heads to do with church what they will, they have made a mess, and it does not take much to look around and see the consequences of this today. Evangelists appeal for money to fund their own lifestyle on Satellite TV with such cringing shamelessness, it beggars belief; but people are taken in. In some churches, ministers and priests administer the sacraments without themselves believing that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and is the unique and only way to the Father; and people wonder why their churches decline.

Certainly if Paul was with us now, he would encourage us to do nothing less than let go of all our religiosity and rules, and return in penitence to the risen Lord Jesus. Through Him we inherit the promises of God and receive the Spirit who builds God's church! We have nothing to fear when we place our trust in Him, and in Him alone.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What are the promises of God, and how have you received them through Jesus?
2. Discuss how Christian people today can best use the 'Law', which is part of our scriptures.
3. Discuss in your group how Jesus may best be honoured in each of the various activities of your church with which you are involved.

Discipleship

To what extent is the risen Lord Jesus central to the life of your own church, whether it be the denomination (such as Methodist, Independent, Baptist or Anglican etc.) or the local congregation? Try this for an exercise. If possible, obtain a publication from the church of which you are a part, and read through it noting when Jesus is referred to, and how. Is He talked about as Lord? Is He mentioned in the course of discussions? Is He mentioned at all? You will have to draw your own conclusions from the results of your research!

Final Prayer

Save us, O Lord God, from the corruption of our minds by things around us which draw us away from faith; the pursuit of leisure, alcohol, the luxuries of life which we enjoy, or the temptations of money, sex or power. Keep us firmly on the path of the Gospel of truth and make us constantly aware of our salvation through the death of Jesus Christ. AMEN

Prayer

We are Your people, O God. As we strive to do what is right, we ask You to sustain us in our attempts to do Your will. Make us ready to discern the difference between what is right and wrong within each situation we face, and despite opposition, may we always contribute to the work of Your Kingdom and the greater good of all humanity. Thank You Lord; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Personal Troubles

Sometime each of us responds to personal troubles in rather predictable ways because, we deal with these things as they happen and somewhat unthinkingly. Ask the Lord to help you 'wait on Him' when trouble strikes, and ask Him to show you new ways to deal with old problems. This can be profoundly liberating, so approach the Lord with hope!

Meditation

Each of us remembers at some early point in childhood, How something we achieved was turned away, ignored, Our efforts were rejected.

What happens with all these feelings, pent up deep within?
Some give back what they received; rejecting those around them
And feel it very deeply.

Rejection then exacts its toll, and some respond with defiance;
Whilst others feel forever small, rejected deep inside, forever.
This is how they are.

But Christ would beg to differ. He took the world's rejection;
He did not turn his back on those who sought to damn Him;
He said; 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!'

So why should we be bound in sin; rejection is rejected!
The risen Christ has given His love, His answer to our pain!
Rejected, but still our Saviour!

Bible Study - Galatians 3:15-22

¹⁵ Friends, I give you a worldly example: once someone's will has been endorsed, no one can add to it or cancel it. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant; it does not say 'to his descendants' as referring to many of them; it says 'to your descendant' referring to one person, who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, introduced four hundred thirty years later, does not cancel a covenant promise previously endorsed by God, as if to do away with the promise. ¹⁸ Now if the inheritance originates from the law then it no longer depends on the promise; but God granted the inheritance to Abraham through the promise!

¹⁹ What then is the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions, arranged by angels and through a mediator, until the descendant would come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰ Now a mediator represents more than one party; but God is one. ²¹ So, is the law opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given which had the power to give life, then righteousness would indeed originate in the law. ²² But the scripture has kept all things captive under the power of sin, so that through faith in Jesus Christ, what was promised might be given to those who believe!

Review

Sometimes, as we read the letters of Paul, it seems as if he writes the same things over and over again but with different emphases and angles; and this is largely true; Paul is completely focussed on teaching that salvation is found by faith in Jesus Christ alone. It is fairly obvious

that something so profoundly simple was open to many forms of misunderstanding, and most of Paul's writings address one or other of these misunderstandings. But crucially, he will not waver from repeatedly affirming the truth of the Gospel for the Gentiles in as many different ways as it takes to counter false religious beliefs. Salvation was to be found by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

In this passage, Paul continues to address the objections of Judaizers within the churches of Galatia who believed that as well as having faith in Jesus, it was necessary to keep the laws of Moses. He had already explained that God's promises to Abraham were made on the basis of faith (3:6-9), and that the law itself could not save anyone because this was not its function (3:10-14). But Judaizers would have quickly retorted to Paul; 'that may be so, but God's revelation to Moses came after Abraham, so the law now covers everything, including the Covenant with Abraham.' Paul was having no more of this than anything else the Judaizers said. How could he get through to them that salvation, as he had constantly maintained in his letter and all his teaching in Galatia, was to be found by faith in Jesus Christ alone?

The route Paul chose on this occasion was to use a legal analogy, likening the promises given to Abraham as a legal will which could not be 'added to' or 'cancelled' (3:15 & 19). His point was straightforward; you cannot just lump together the inheritance of Abraham with the revelation of the Law under Moses (3:17,18). The promises given to Abraham were eternal. Paul also managed to appeal to the remnants of faith in Jesus Christ which were still part of the belief system of the Judaizers with whom he was arguing. Basically, what he said was that the promises of God to Abraham (mostly in Genesis 17:1-10), were given exclusively to 'one' descendant, Jesus Christ, through whom the promises would be made available to all people (3:16). It is easy to see that this is what Paul says, but the nature of the argument is awkward, and we will therefore have to study it further, later on.

In the middle of our passage, Paul makes one very important comment. He tells us what he believes to be the purpose of the law (3:19). This is very important, because without this verse within Galatians, we would be left thinking that there was no room for the laws of Moses in Paul's view of Christian faith; and this would not be true. Briefly, Paul said that the law had a purpose, which was all about 'transgressions' (3:19); in other words, the purpose of the law was to reveal sin. The rest of Scripture agrees that this is an important role for the Law; it is God's moral and spiritual guide for living in this world, even if it does not represent the ultimate spiritual truth and goal of salvation through Christ.

Paul wraps up this passage with some comments about the law and the way in which it was given. We may be a little confused in verses 19 and 20, because Paul speaks of the law as being 'mediated', and coming through angels, and this does not make sense to us who have read Exodus and Deuteronomy and read about the law being given to the people through Moses on Mount Sinai. However, in Paul's day, it was thought that angels 'mediated' the law from God to Moses, and Paul's final point is that salvation is not mediated through angels, but directly through God's Son, Jesus Christ. Paul was again making the same point; salvation was to be found through faith in Jesus Christ alone. It was not mediated by angels!

Going Deeper

These arguments are relatively easy to follow, but the passage does have some important features which we have not mentioned. Also, nearly every verse has some part of it which is not as straightforward as may seem. Nevertheless, Paul's persistence in arguing the case for the unique nature of the Gospel message in Christ is fascinating, and very effective!

A legal example

Paul's example of a human will is helpful, but not exactly straightforward. Another more literal way of translating what Paul says is this; 'once an man's covenant has been ratified, no one can add to it or cancel it' (3:15). The words Paul used were loaded and important; firstly, the word for 'will' or 'covenant' was indeed the Greek word used for a person's 'last will and testament', as we say today. It was also the word used to translate the 'Covenant' of God in the Old Testament, a word full of meaning for all Jews as well as Christians, because the Covenant was shorthand for all the promises of blessing which God intended for His people. In the Old Testament, the blessing was given in the form of national growth and prosperity, and also the inheritance of the land of Canaan on which God's people lived. Paul, however, knew that such material blessings were only a physical example of God's intended spiritual blessing of all the

nations (Gen 12:3), through the salvation of souls found in Jesus Christ (3:16). Nearly everything he said was intended to illustrate this truth.

Returning to the legal example, Paul knew well that in Roman (and Greek) law, a will could be changed and amended before someone's death, but after they had died, it was set and could not be changed. To begin with, Paul may have intended us to infer that once Abraham had died, the great promises God gave him were now fixed; nothing could change the promises, not even the arrival of the law, 450 years later (3:17). However, once Paul introduced the idea that God had in mind one descendant of Abraham as being the one through whom the promises would be fulfilled (3:16), we are faced with the possibility that Paul may have viewed the death of Christ as the one death which fixed God's will. In other words, in arguing against the Judaizers, he was saying, 'you cannot add anything to the inheritance of faith, now that Jesus Christ died on the Cross for us'. Paul does not say this directly, but it is easy to see that he may well have wished the Judaizers to pick this up from what he was saying.

Christ, the one 'descendant' of Abraham?

The main problem most people have with verse 16 is that from a literal point of view, what Paul says is not a very good argument. He says (literally) that God gave His promises to Abraham and his 'seed', which we have translated as 'descendant'. However, the singular word 'seed' is one of those words which in English and Hebrew and Greek, can be used in the singular and include the meaning of the plural as well (for example, if a farmer talked about his 'seed' for planting, then he would be describing a large number of individual 'seeds'). Paul simply says that because the word is singular then it means that the promises of Abraham are fulfilled in one man Jesus Christ, which is an argument which grammatically, does not work!

It is essential to understand that here, as in other places, although Paul was a scholar who knew the details of language and philosophy, he regarded revealed spiritual truth as more important. The reason he made the case from Genesis 17 that God had Jesus in mind as the one true descendant of Abraham, and the one fulfilment of His promises was undoubtedly because this is what Paul firmly believed. The scriptural argument was secondary for him, and the revealed truth of salvation through Jesus Christ was everything. This is the reason for the rather strange verse 18, which in the light of what we have just said, is Paul's roundabout argument which says something like this; 'if the salvation we have through Jesus Christ comes from the Laws of Moses, then God's promises to Abraham are irrelevant (as you Judaizers seem to suggest). However, it is obvious that it does connect with the promises of God to Abraham; therefore the law has no function in our salvation!'

Paul would not let go of his main point. Jesus Christ alone made sense of the history of the Jewish people, because through Him, all the great Covenant promises of God through Abraham were made available to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, according to God's original promises (Gen 12:3), and also His intention ever since the fall of humanity (Gen 3).

The purpose of the law – and the 'mediator'

Paul appears rather disparaging as he describes the law as an addendum to the Covenant 'will' of God, describing it as 'added because of transgressions'. This is an important statement about the place of the law within Christian faith (see above), but we should not forget that Paul simply would not give the law any place of importance within his preaching. He regarded that as far too dangerous, whatever the general purpose of the Law. In general, the impression we get of Paul's attitude towards the Law is that it was temporary, something necessary to help people know what God's will was. The reason Paul was cautious was because the Law as a whole forms a systematic religious system which sets out to define the relationship between God and people. Paul felt that if someone was saved through faith in Jesus Christ, the law no longer performed this function because people could access God directly through Jesus. Its role was informative and advisory, not definitive.

These sentiments lie behind what Paul says in verses 19 to 22. Paul chose to illustrate the secondary nature of the law by describing the way in which the law was given, and although this does not tally with our picture today, he certainly reflected what was believed in his own day. The common understanding was indeed that it was not God who had met with Moses to pass on the commandments of God, but angels. This was because people believed that no one could see God and still remain alive (a sentiment found in a number of places in Scripture – Ex 33:20 etc.), and they concluded that Moses must have encountered God's angels on the top of Sinai, just as Abraham had met God through angelic visitors (Gen 18:1f.) centuries before.