

Chapter 6

The biblical explanation: a new covenant

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, who could say that they were done away? Only one authority could do away with God-given commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to see the authority for doing away with any of God's laws.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings) are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from Leviticus and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid, for example, while other commands from the same sections are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not.

A large category

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid. However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is "the Law of Moses." In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is "the law." In Galatians 3:17, it is "the law" that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is "the law with its commandments and ordinances," the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants, or the agreements between God and humanity.

Why should the death of Christ cause God-given laws to become outdated? The Bible gives a simple explanation: Christ brought a *new* covenant. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7 to 10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to

the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is obsolete (8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a new covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect *some* similarities. We should expect moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which existed before Abraham, should also be included in the Sinai covenant, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as valid today not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it valid), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the Law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises (Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes civil laws and ceremonial laws, was designed to come to an end when Christ came. The Scriptures are not annulled, of course, but the laws there are no longer binding.

This is brought out especially clearly in the book of Galatians, chapters 3 and 4. Let's go through these chapters verse by verse, to make sure that we are getting each verse in its context.

Galatians 3: the law and the Spirit

Paul, who had seen many things in his ministry, was flabbergasted with the Galatian Christians. He was aghast that they were being persuaded by a foolish idea. He wrote a strongly worded letter to stop this nonsense. In 3:1 he wrote: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified."

Here's the starting point, Paul says: Jesus Christ has been crucified. That is the foundation on which we build. His crucifixion changes everything, as Paul will explain.

"I would like to learn just one thing from you," Paul writes. "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" (verse 2). Obviously, they received the Spirit through faith, by accepting what

they heard. This is another foundational point. Paul was astounded that the Galatians did not see the consequences of their experience with the Spirit. But apparently someone was telling them that they were saved only if they observed “the law.”

“Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (verse 3). The Galatian Christians were apparently being taught that they needed to add the law to their faith. False teachers were saying that they needed to progress further in the faith by observing the Torah. They were teaching circumcision and the entire Law of Moses (Galatians 5:2-3; Acts 15:5).

Paul says this is a ridiculous idea — if a person is given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith, without deserving this gift, then Christianity is based on faith, and there is no place for works as far as salvation is concerned. (Paul will later comment on how Christians should behave in response to Christ’s work, but here he makes it clear that salvation is on the foundation of faith in what Christ has done.) Our goal cannot be attained by human effort, and that is why Jesus died on the cross. Whatever work had to be done, he did on the cross. That is our foundation.

Paul asks, “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (Galatians 3:5). The people had seen miracles in their midst. And it came on the basis of faith, not of works of the Law.

Abraham

Paul then supports his argument from the Torah itself. “Consider Abraham,” he said, quoting from Genesis 15:6: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Paul concludes, “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:6-7).

Paul’s point is that even in the Old Testament, a right relationship with God came through faith. Abraham was accounted righteous on the basis of faith, not because of his obedience. If we have faith, then we are accepted just as Abraham was.

Can non-Jewish people really have a relationship with God on that kind of basis? Yes, says Paul, and he again quotes the Torah: “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” (verse 8). The Torah says that non-Jews will be blessed through Abraham — and that blessing is by faith, not by the law. Abraham did not need to be given the Law of Moses, and his spiritual followers do not need it, either.

Paul concludes, “Those who have faith are blessed

along with Abraham, the man of faith” (verse 9). God’s blessing is by faith.

The Law vs. faith

The law brings penalties, not blessing. “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’” (verse 10). The law is not a way to earn favor with God. It functions in the reverse way, since we all fall short of its demands. If we think we have to observe the Torah, if we want to be under the law, we will be under its condemnation.

“No one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them’” (verses 11-12). Paul is contrasting faith and law. Righteous people should live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4), but the law is based on performance (Leviticus 18:5). The law emphasizes human effort, but salvation is given by grace through faith in what Jesus has done.

Law-keeping cannot earn us God’s favor. If we look to it, it can bring only a curse, since we all fall short. But even in the curse, there is good news — in the crucifixion of Christ: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (verse 13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23). The law demanded a penalty for law-breaking, and Jesus Christ paid the worst penalty of the law.

Paul is using several lines of reasoning to show that Christians are not under the authority of the Law of Moses; we are not obligated to obey it. Not only is the law ineffective, bringing a curse rather than a blessing, Jesus has also paid its worst penalty. His crucifixion gives Paul the basis for saying that Christians are not under the law.

“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit” (verse 14). The blessing is by faith as opposed to the law.

God’s promise not changed by the Law

Paul then argues from another angle, using the example of a contract. “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” (verse 15).

Paul is talking about God’s promise to Abraham, which includes being accounted righteous by faith. He writes, “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his

seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (verse 16).

Here Paul notes that the word seed is singular. Although the singular word can be used for many seeds, Paul is saying that this scripture finds its fulfillment most perfectly in one Seed, Jesus Christ. It is through him that Gentiles can become part of Abraham’s descendants (verse 29).

“The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise” (verse 17). What law is Paul talking about? The law given 430 years after Abraham — the Law of Moses. The laws that came through Moses cannot change the fact that God accepts people as righteous on the basis of faith, not by human efforts.

Paul then reasons, “For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise” (verse 18). Either it is one way or the other — either by laws and works, or by faith and gift. Paul does not try to combine the two. Rather, he is saying they cannot be combined.

Purpose of the Law

Why did God give the law? Paul answers: “It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (verse 19). Were laws added because the people were already breaking them? Or were they added so that people could see more clearly that they were sinners? Either way, the Law of Moses was added for only a certain length of time — until Christ came. After that, the Law of Moses became obsolete. The law added 430 years after Abraham became obsolete.

“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” (verse 21). The law did not nullify the promise of salvation by faith, for it was not designed as another means of salvation. If there was any way possible for laws to bring us right standing with God, then God would have given us those laws. But the Law of Moses is not designed to give us eternal life.

People who think they can improve their standing with God through the law are misunderstanding its purpose and are not accepting the biblical evidence that salvation is simply by faith, without any role for human efforts. We receive the Spirit by faith and are counted righteous by faith, without any need to add the Law of Moses.

The law cannot give life, because we all fall short of what it requires. “The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given

to those who believe” (verse 22). Instead of giving life, the law prescribes penalties, and the result is that the promise of salvation can come only through God’s grace. The law makes it clear that we all fall short and need the salvation that Jesus offers by faith.

But before faith in Christ came, “we [the Jewish people] were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed” (verse 23). The Jews were under the restrictions of the law, under its temporary jurisdiction or custody.

“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (verse 24). The law had authority from Moses until Christ. It showed that humans are prisoners of sin, unable to save themselves through human effort. It showed that salvation can be received only through faith, not by law.

Now that the Law of Moses has fulfilled its purpose, however, it has become obsolete: “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25). The Torah does not have authority over us. It is not a way to get right with God. It is not a way to enter his kingdom nor a way to stay in his kingdom nor a way to improve our standing with God.

Because of Jesus’ crucifixion, our relationship with God depends entirely on faith. “You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (verse 26).

Since Christ is the descendant of Abraham, and we belong to Christ, then we are also descendants of Abraham and inheritors of the promise of salvation (verse 29). Through faith in Christ, we inherit the promise given to Abraham by faith.

When it comes to inheriting Abraham’s promise, there is neither Jew nor Greek — all ethnic groups may inherit. In Christ, even slaves can receive an inheritance from Abraham. In salvation, there is likewise no difference between male and female — all have equal rights to inherit the promise (verse 28).

Children now come of age

In Galatians 4, Paul takes the concept of inheritance into another analogy, to show again that the law was only a temporary authority and that Christians are not obligated to it.

“What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world” (4:1-3).

If a father died early, he might leave his entire estate to a young child. The child, although the legal owner, would not have authority to run the estate. A temporary

trustee would run the estate, would have authority over all the slaves of that estate, and would also have authority over the legal owner, as long as the heir was under age.

Paul then makes the analogy that “we” (apparently including himself and the Jewish people) were under that kind of temporary authority. Just as he earlier said that “we were held prisoners by the law” (3:23), he now says that the Jewish people were like underage children — inheritors who were under authority, just as slaves are.

But the child is not like a slave forever. Eventually a time comes when authority is given to the heir. “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (4:4-5).

Jesus was born under the jurisdiction of the Law, and he redeemed or rescued the Jewish people from the restrictions of the Mosaic law.

Now, Jews may receive the full inheritance rights, which implies that they could not inherit under the law. The law could never give them the inheritance, that is, salvation. When Jews come to faith, they are under Christ, not under the law.

Gentiles no longer slaves

Gentiles, who were not under the Law of Moses, also become inheritors through Christ, so at this point Paul begins to use the word *you* again: “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (verses 6-7).

Since God had given the Holy Spirit to these Gentile Christians, that was proof that they were his children, with the right to inherit the promise. They were no longer slaves under a restrictive authority. But what kind of slavery had Jesus redeemed them from?

Paul explains: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods” (4:9). They had been enslaved by pagan religions.

“But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” (4:9). The Gentile Christians, having been rescued from slavery, were thinking of returning to bondage. They wouldn’t have put it in those words, of course, but Paul is pointing out that this is what it amounts to.

Apparently they were being tempted with a different sort of slavery than what they came out of. They were being told that they had to be circumcised and that they had to obey the Law of Moses (4:21; 5:2-4). They had come out of pagan principles but were in danger of going

back into *another* set of rules — another nonfaith approach to religion.

(Paul uses the uncommon Greek word *stoicheia* here for principles of the Galatian heresy, the same word he used in 4:3 for the slavery “we” had under the old covenant “basic principles.” The context of the letter makes it clear that the slavery the Galatians were falling back into was an obligation to old covenant customs.)

Paul then mentions one way they were falling back into servitude: “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (4:10). In a heresy that involved circumcision and the Law of Moses, it is not difficult to guess what sort of days, months, seasons and years were being advocated. The old covenant said a lot about special times.

But if Paul was talking about the special days of Judaism, why didn’t he say so? It is because the Galatians were coming out of one religion and into another. Paul used words that applied to *both* religions to point out the similarities involved. Pagan religions had their special days, months, seasons and years; so did the old covenant. They had a different set of days, but it is similar. The Galatians had come out of religious bondage, and were going back into a religious servitude.

So Paul asks: How could you do such a thing? Can’t you see how foolish this is? Don’t you know that this can enslave you all over again? Paul does not say *how* they were observing these special days. He did not say they should observe them in a better way or a different way. He just said that the way they were observing them was a form of bondage, of feeling obligated to something that was not obligatory.

Paul pleads with them

“I fear for you,” Paul wrote in verse 11, “that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.” In order to win them to Christ, he had become like a Gentile (4:12; 2:14; 1 Corinthians 9:21). Now he urges them to become like he is.

With tears, no doubt, Paul remembered how eagerly the Galatians had first believed the gospel he preached. They had joyfully received the gospel with great respect for Paul. That is why Paul is so astonished that they had so quickly believed a different message (4:12-16).

He points out that the false teachers had selfish motives (verse 17), but his sincerity is shown by the fact that he is willing to suffer to help them become more like Christ (verse 19).

Son of a slave, or son of promise?

Paul then moves to an illustration of slavery and promise, taken from the Torah itself: “Tell me, you who

want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?" (verse 21). Paul speaks now to people who want to be under the authority of the Torah. This was the heresy he was fighting against.

"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise" (verses 22-23). Paul reminds the readers here of Hagar and Sarah, and the fact that Abraham's blessing was given to Isaac, the child God gave Sarah in a miraculous way. The blessing was given on the basis of grace, not of normal human ability.

He then draws a dramatic analogy from this: "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants" (verse 24). The Old Testament does not make this analogy — Paul is creating it for his own purposes. Some might not like the analogy, because it makes Paul's point painfully clear: "One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children" (verses 24-25).

Hagar is here associated with the old covenant, the covenant made at Mount Sinai and in Paul's day centered in Jerusalem. This covenant produces slave children, and all who are under the old covenant are in slavery. Paul was flabbergasted as to why the Galatians were being tempted to fall into this slavery (verse 9), an old covenant slavery that included the observance of special days and months and seasons and years (verse 10).

But Christians are not under the old covenant. "The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" (verses 26, 28). Christians are children of Abraham's

promise, and are free — which means, in this context, free of old covenant restrictions.

Eliminate slavery

Paul then points out another useful application of the analogy: "The son born in the ordinary way [Ishmael] persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit [Isaac]. It is the same now" (verse 29). That is, the Jewish children of the old covenant were persecuting the children of the new covenant. The Judaizers were pressuring the Gentile Christians to conform to the old covenant.

Paul then makes his point, again from the Scriptures that the people respected: "But what does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son'" (verse 30; Genesis 21:10). The application is clear: Get rid of those who teach the old covenant. Do not listen to them, for they will not inherit the promises of Abraham (5:2).

Paul is struggling for the spiritual survival of the Galatian Christians. He does not mince his words or beat around the bush. Rather, he makes it clear: The old covenant is slavery and you must get rid of it. Christian life is not found in the old covenant.

"Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman" (verse 31). We are children of the new covenant, not the old. We cannot have both — we must choose the new.

Review

- Scripture says that a large category of law is obsolete.
- Paul says that salvation is by faith, not law.
- Law can only declare us guilty, not rescue us.
- The law cannot affect the promise of salvation by faith.
- The law of Moses was designed to be temporary.
- Being obligated to the law of Moses is like slavery.
- Question: Can faith and law be combined? (Gal. 3:17)
- Paul himself gives numerous commands in Galatians 5. Can grace and command have different functions?

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