

The Purpose of the Law

J. Dwight Pentecost

What is the purpose of the Law? Such is the question the Apostle Paul faced with his readers in the third chapter of Galatians as he taught them the doctrine of sanctification by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul is dealing with the problem as to how a person is sanctified, made perfect, or how he attains experientially the promises and blessings that are his in Christ. The Galatians had been led to believe that sanctification is by the Law and that through keeping of the Law believers obtain the promises that were given to them by God. In order to show the fallacy of this interpretation, the apostle has cited the experience of Abraham. Abraham was given promises by God (Gen. 12) which were repeated (Gen. 13) and ratified by a blood covenant (Gen. 15). All that Abraham obtained he obtained by faith in the promise of God. Such teaching would be incontrovertible by virtue of the fact that no Law had been given in Abraham's time. Therefore, all that Abraham realized he had to realize by faith in the promise of God.

The error that had been propagated among the Galatians was that although Abraham attained by faith alone, the giving of the Law altered the basic plan by which God dealt with men, so that Abraham's children subsequent to the giving of the Law must attain by keeping the Law rather than by faith in the promise of God. In order to dispel this error, Paul shows in verse 17 of the third chapter of Galatians that "the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect." Paul adds in verse 19 that rather than disallowing the Law or nullifying the Law, the Law was added, or better added

alongside the existing promise, in order to serve a specific function. He further shows in verse 21 that there is no basic conflict between the Law and the promises of God and that the two can coexist. Anticipating certain objections or questions in the minds of his readers, Paul faces the question specifically. "Wherefore, then, serveth the law?" (v. 19). It is this specific question that must be considered now.

It should be observed that many who lived under the Law had the deepest reverence, respect, and love for the Law. David writing in Psalm 119 frequently reflects his attitude. In verse 97 he said, "O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day." Or in verse 77 he said, "Thy law is my delight." Again, in verses 103-4, he wrote, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through thy precepts I get understanding." Or once again, in verse 159, he said, "Consider how I love thy precepts." David shows a love for and dependence upon the Law. In contrast with much current antinomianism which treats the Law as a worthless worn-out garment to be discarded, the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:12 says, "The law is holy and the commandment holy, and just, and good." That which was loved, revered, and respected by Old and New Testament writers must have served a worthy function.

It needs to be noted that the Law of Moses was given to a redeemed people. The writer to the Hebrews in Hebrews 11:28 says of Moses, "Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land." Israel, the night of the Passover in Egypt, was redeemed by blood. By faith they began a walk through the wilderness toward the land of promise. It was on the basis of that blood redemption that God could say to the nation as recorded in Isaiah 43:1, "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." The nation that was redeemed by faith through blood was brought to Mount Sinai. Although that nation had been redeemed, it was a nation which was viewed as being in spiritual immaturity. They recognized a responsibility to the Redeemer which they did not know how to discharge.

The fact of Israel's infancy at the time of the giving of the Law is recognized by the Apostle Paul who writes in Galatians 3:23-26, "But before faith came, we were kept unto the law, shut

up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." Or again in Galatians 4:1-5, "Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Paul views those living under the Law as children in a state of immaturity, and he views the Law as a pedagogue, a child trainer or overseer whose responsibility it was to supervise every area of the life of the child committed to its care. It is because of this fact of immaturity that Israel needed the Law. Thus the Law was given as a gracious provision by God to a redeemed people who were in a state of spiritual infancy to meet their needs.

As the Scriptures are studied, a number of reasons may be derived why the Mosaic Law was given to the nation Israel. First, it was given to reveal the holiness of God. Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:15, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." The fact that God was a holy God was made very clear to Israel in the Law of Moses. Perhaps the primary function of the Law was to reveal to Israel the fact of the holiness of God and to make Israel aware of the character of the God who had redeemed them from Egypt. All the requirements laid upon the nation Israel were in the light in the holy character of God as revealed in the Mosaic Law.

Second, the Mosaic Law was given to reveal or expose the sinfulness of man. It is of this that Paul writes in Galatians 3:19, when he says, "It [the Law] was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hands of a mediator. . . . But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe." The holiness of God as revealed in the Law became the test of man's thoughts, words, and actions, and anything that failed to conform to the revealed holiness of God was sin. It is this fact that Paul has in mind when he writes in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory

of God.” That in which God finds His highest glory is His own holiness. Sin is not only want of conformity unto the Law but want of conformity unto the holiness of God of which the Law is a revelation. Consequently the holiness of God becomes the final test of sin rather than the Law which is the reflection of that holiness. Because all Abraham’s seed were born in sin, the Law was given by which Israel might readily determine their sinfulness before a Holy God. The Law made very specific the requirements of divine holiness so that even children in spiritual infancy could determine whether their conduct was acceptable to a holy God.

A third purpose of the Law, related to the above, was to reveal the standard of holiness required of those in fellowship with a holy God. Israel had been redeemed as a nation. They were redeemed in order to enjoy fellowship with God. As these redeemed ones faced the question of what kind of life was required of those who walk in fellowship with their Redeemer, the Law was given to reveal the standard that God required. It is this the psalmist recognized in Psalm 24:3-5 as he said, “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.” Those who were redeemed were redeemed to enjoy the Redeemer, and the Law made it very clear the kind of life that was required if they were to walk in fellowship with Him.

A fourth purpose of the Law is stated by the apostle in Galatians 3:24, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster . . . unto Christ.” The word *schoolmaster* refers to the slave selected by the father whose responsibility it was to supervise the total development of the child, physically, intellectually, spiritually. The child was under the pedagogue’s constant supervision till such time he should move out of infancy into adulthood. Every area of the child’s life was under the supervision of the pedagogue until he came to maturity. It is the teaching of the apostle that the Law served to supervise physical, mental, and spiritual development of the redeemed Israelite until he should come to maturity in Christ. The psalmist reflects this same concept in Psalm 119:71-72, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes. The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.” David confesses that through the Law that had been revealed he learned of God’s requirements.

A fifth purpose of the Law is that it was given to be the unifying principle that made possible the establishment of the nation. In Exodus 19:5-8 one reads, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." One notices in the eighth verse that in response to the instruction given by Moses as to what God had revealed, the nation voluntarily submitted themselves to the authority of the Law. Apart from voluntary submission to a unifying principle there could have been no nation. And the people redeemed out of Egypt by blood who had begun a walk by faith are constituted a nation when they voluntarily submit themselves unto the Law.

This same truth is reaffirmed in Deuteronomy 5:27-28, "Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it. And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the Lord said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken." From the divine viewpoint Israel was constituted a nation at the time they voluntarily submitted themselves unto the Law.

It is significant that the prophet Jeremiah warns the people that because they have abandoned the Law God will deliver them into the hand of the Gentiles. The Babylonian captivity by which Israel lost their national identity came about because of their failure to observe the Law. In Deuteronomy 28 Moses had made it very clear that if the people abandoned the Law, God would deliver them into the hands of the Gentiles. And it is not without significance that until Israel submits to the authority of the law of her Messiah-King she will not be recognized by God as a nation again.

Related to this in the sixth place it is to be observed that the Law was given to Israel to separate Israel from the nations in order that they might become a kingdom of priests. In Exodus 31:13 one reads "Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that

doth sanctify you." Israel was sanctified or set apart according to Exodus 19:5,6 to become a kingdom of priests, that is, a nation that mediated the truth of God to the nations of the earth. The Law became a hedge that separated Israel from the nations of the earth. The Law separated, preserved the nation and kept them intact. In order that Israel might serve the function of a light to the world, they were given the Law, that the Law might separate them from the nations.

In the seventh place the Law was given to a redeemed people to make provision for forgiveness of sins and restoration to fellowship. In Leviticus 1-7 there are the five offerings that God instituted for the nation. While the nation as a nation was preserved before God because of the annual offering of the blood of atonement, individuals in the nation were restored to fellowship, received forgiveness for specific sins through the use of the offerings that God provided. The God who had redeemed the nation by faith through blood provided that the redeemed could walk in fellowship with Himself. The same Law that revealed their unworthiness for fellowship also provided for restoration to the fellowship. This was one of the primary functions of the Law.

In the eighth place the Law was given to make provision for a redeemed people to worship. A redeemed people will be a worshipping people, and a people who walk in fellowship with God will worship the God with whom they enjoy fellowship. In Leviticus 23 the Law revealed a cycle of feasts which the nation was expected to observe annually. These feasts were the means by which the nation as a redeemed nation worshipped God. In the cycle of feasts Israel's attention was directed backward to the redemption out of Egypt and forward to the final redemption that would be provided through the Redeemer according to God's promise.

The Law, in the ninth place, provided a test as to whether one was in the kingdom or the theocracy over which God ruled. In Deuteronomy 28 as Israel stood on the border of the promised land, Moses revealed the principle by which God would deal with the nation. The first portion of the chapter outlines the blessings that would come upon the nation for obedience. A great portion of that extensive chapter deals with the curses that would come on the nation because of disobedience. Even though the nation as a whole entered into the promised land, because not all had believed God, not all were eligible to receive the blessings promised to those

in the land. The Law, then, became that which revealed whether a man was rightly related to God or not. Those who submitted to and obeyed the Law did so because of their faith in God which produced obedience. Those who disobeyed the Law did so because they were without faith in God, and lack of faith produced their disobedience. Whether a man obeyed the Law or not, then, became the test as to whether he was rightly related to God or in God's kingdom.

Finally, it becomes clear from the New Testament that the Law was given to reveal Jesus Christ. The great truths concerning the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ are woven throughout the Law, and the Law was given in order that it might prepare the nation for the coming Redeemer King. It was because of this that the Lord on the Emmaus road could expound to His companions great truths concerning the Messiah that had been revealed in the Law and the Prophets. Israel, through the Law, was being prepared for the coming Messiah through the revelation of Him which it contained.

As one looks back over these reasons for the giving of the Law, he can observe that there was in the Law that which was *revelatory* of the holiness of God. This aspect of the Law was permanent. Holiness does not change from age to age, and that which revealed the holiness of God to Israel may still be used to reveal the holiness of God to men today. That which reveals the holiness of God reveals concomitantly the unholiness of man, and the Law may still be used to reveal the unholiness of men today. It is this revelatory aspect of the Law that Paul refers to as holy, just, and good.

There was also that in the Law which was *regulatory*. The Law regulated the life and the worship of the Israelite. It is this regulatory aspect of the Law that was temporary, that has been done away. Paul in Timothy 1:8 writes, "But we know that the law is good if a man use it lawfully." How can the Law be used lawfully in an age in which it is said that the Law had been done away? If a Law is used to reveal the holiness of God, the unholiness of man, the requirements of those who would live in fellowship with the holy God, or to learn of the person and work of Christ, it is used lawfully. One who attempts to use the regulatory portions of the Law which were "only until Christ" is using the Law unlawfully. While one sings, "Free from the law, or happy condition," one still recognizes that the Law is "holy, just and good."