
The Purpose of the Old Covenant

Galatians 2:15-4:7¹

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A tool has a purpose:

A word processing program can keep lists but it is not a database...

A screwdriver can be used to hit things but it is not a hammer...

A story has a purpose:

It can tell you what happened and sometimes why...

It can explain how people responded and why...

It can be compelling but it is not commanding...

A law has a purpose:

It is legislation that governs you if you are under it...

It tells you what you cannot do (or can do)...

It tells you what happens when you don't...

It cannot force you to do it...

It cannot equip you to do it...

The Old Testament is a story, a tool and legislation. It has purposes. It must be used in accordance with its purposes. Now if I drive a nail with a screwdriver or use a story to compel moral obedience, I am misusing the tool, but I do not cause eternal damage. If I misuse the Old Covenant and the Law in particular, I will (not may, will) cause deep spiritual harm.

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Classical Reformed teaching and creeds say there are three New Testament uses of the Law. If I may, I will summarize them this way.

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| The Teaching Use | The Law can be used to teach people what sin is and to drive them to the gospel. The Law is an important tool in evangelism. |
| The Civil Use | The Law is used to restrain evil in the world through its threats of punishment. Nations ought to establish their law systems on Biblical Law. |
| The Moral Use | The Law in the Ten Commandments is an expression of the unchanging character and holiness of God and thus is the foundational moral code for all of God's people including the church. |

The Bible speaks of the purposes of the Old Covenant and the Mosaic Law. Some then distinguish Biblical *purposes* from permitted *uses*. The Law has its Biblically defined purposes. But, we may also use it in these ways. I have serious questions about whether the Bible warrants the use of the Old Covenant in ways that actually may violate its *limited purposes*. So, we will focus on the **Biblical purposes** of the Old Covenant and Mosaic Law. New Covenant theologians question these uses.

Does the Scripture see these as uses for Gentiles?

Does the Scripture see these as uses in the present New Covenant age?

How does legislation given to Israel apply to Gentiles?

Is there a New Testament command or example of preaching the Ten Commandments in evangelism?

Does the New Testament divide the Mosaic Law into three parts, civil, ceremonial and moral, or does it treat the Law as a whole?

We along with most New Covenant theologians, trying to follow the Bible, would say, "No, these uses as explained by classical Reformed theology are not the purposes of the Law and to use it that way will do spiritual harm." Our understanding of the third use of the Law is very different. We do not believe that the Ten Commandments standing alone are the basic ethical code for the church. We do not look back to the Ten Commandments to know how to live. We look into the Law of Christ, the perfect Law of Liberty and walk, not according to the flesh and the world but according to the Spirit.

Now, these misuses are not new. Paul had to deal with misuse of the Jewish Law and the Old Covenant. It was causing real spiritual harm. It was dangerous to the health of the church. It was a denial of the gospel. It brought Christians back under the Old Covenant (Old Testament) to obedience that is under Legislation rather than teaching them obedience is an outflow of Life.

The purposes of the Old Covenant create the perceived problems:

Our Galatians text is also going to show the problems, the insufficiency, short-coming of the Mosaic Law and the Old Covenant. It grounds those in its temporary purpose. So there will be some discussion of the problems of the Old Covenant today, but we will explore that more in depth next week.

The Meaning of *Law*

What does the Bible mean by the Law?

Its Biblical Definitions

The word "Law" in the Bible is used to refer to:

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| Legislation | Law can be a code of conduct grounded in a moral framework. An example would be the United States Constitution. The Mosaic Law is the national constitution of Israel and functions as such. |
| Principles | Law can be statements of observations of the way things work. An example would be the Law of Gravity. The Law of Gravity is not legislation per se; it is a statement of the way gravity works. The Law of Christ, the Law of Liberty, the Law of the Spirit in Christ all refer to way the life of God by the Spirit in us expresses itself in living that pleases God. |

Its Biblical Uses

The word "Law" in the Bible may, according to the context, be referring to one of the following

The Law may be the whole of the Old Testament Canon as it existed at the point used

This is particularly true of the Old Testament writers.

It is easily illustrated in Psalms and Proverbs.

The Law may be the whole of the Mosaic Covenant

This is particularly true in the New Testament use by the Apostles/

This is most clearly illustrated in the book of Hebrews.

The Law may be the Ten Commandments in Exodus.

This is used only occasionally by Jesus and Paul and normally by the 2 great commands to love God and love neighbor.

The Law is never called Ten Commandments in New Testament and only 3 times in Old Testament.

It is usually referred to in some way by the phrase, *Tablets of Stone*, on which it was written.

The Law of Christ

This is used exclusively in the New Testament and only occurs 3 times, all in Paul's writings. This is not *Legislation* but rather is Principles. It is the observations of the way the life of God in the soul will express itself often given as imperatives to shape that very expression.

Its Default Use

Normally, unless absolutely clear from the context and narrowed by the writer of Scripture

The Law refers to the Mosaic Covenant including the Decalogue

It was a part of the national identity of Israel.

It was given in totality at Mt Sinai and was expounded on and explained in other Old Testament books.

It required obedience to receive its blessing which included life. Only Jesus Christ met this obedience and thus received the promised blessings.

It promised death and destruction upon disobedience. Every human being except for Jesus has disobeyed the Law and thus has been condemned by it.

The Law was fulfilled by Christ who kept it perfectly and thus accomplished part of what it was intended to do.

It was fading away and coming to an end during the writing of the book of Hebrews. It is no longer the covenant between God and His people.

It is still in-force over those who are in the flesh, those who are unbelievers.

It is still to be used for the wicked, for sinners, for transgressors as means of restraining and condemning sin in their lives.

The Purpose of the Law

Galatians 2:15-3:22

The Apostle Paul helps us understand the purpose of the Law. He does so first by focus on what its purpose is not and then what its purpose is.

Negative - What it is not...

First, we must consider how the Law is commonly misunderstood and misused.

It is not how we are justified

(2:15-16)

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

It is not how we live the Christian life

(2:17-3:6)

¹⁷ But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

¹ O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you

receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

We are live by the power of the Spirit not by the works of the Law. While obedience is important in the Christian life, our walk with God is so much more than mere obedience. It is the life of God expressed in this world by walking in the Spirit.

It cannot replace faith

(3:7-14)

The Law cannot and does not do what faith does. Faith in God and His Word is how God connects us to His saving and transforming life. Law cannot do this.

We are saved by faith...

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

We live the Christian life by faith...

¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

It cannot bring us the inheritance that was promised to Abraham (3:15-18)

¹⁵ To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

All that God gives us as His people *comes to us through promises* not through *legislation*. All that God promises comes to us as an inheritance. It comes to us because of the death and resurrection of another. We cannot work for it. We cannot obey in order to obtain it. We believe God’s promises by faith and thus obtain it.

It cannot give life and so cannot bring righteousness (3:21-22)

²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The Law cannot give life. It cannot solve the problem of our spiritual death. The Law imprisons us in sin. But by faith we live. The promise of life comes to those who believe.

Positive - Why it is

So why was the Mosaic Law given? Until Jesus came...

It was temporary provision (3:19-20)

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

As a temporary provision and protection against sin for Israel until Jesus came. The Law was given because of sin. It was temporary until the promised offspring, the Lord Jesus, came.

It had a limited role (3:21-22)

²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The Law served in a limited role so that salvation is by faith. The Law served to make everyone guilty before God so that those who believe would be saved by faith, not by keeping the Law.

It was a tutor (3:23-29)

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The Law functioned as a temporary guardian or tutor until we believed by faith. Now that we are saved are no longer under that tutor or guardian.

Made the whole world accountable (Romans 3:19-21)

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held

accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The Law gave the knowledge of sin so that all human beings are accountable to God. The Law defined what sin was and exposed all as sinners. Keeping the Law did not and will not save since legislation can only describe what is wrong but has no power to declare a person just in God's sight.

The Limitations of the Mosaic Law

However, the Mosaic Law and the Tablets of Stone:

Do not define the totality of sin (Romans 1:28-32)

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

All through the New Testament, lists of sins are much broader than those listed in the Law. They include some of the commands from the Ten Commandments. But never are the Ten Commandments simply repeated as defining what sin is.

Are not the power of God for salvation. (Romans 1:16-17)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The gospel is the means by which God delivers salvation to those who believe it. Not the Law, but the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

Its New Covenant Uses

So, is the Old Testament useful to us? Why don't we just read, study and preach the New Testament? Because, now that Christ has come, the New Testament tells us how to interpret, understand and use the Old Testament.

The Old Covenant as Scripture

... is profitable to us in all the ways the New Testament tells us. It is useful to us as the Word of God. But that use varies depending on whether it is narrative, legislation, wisdom, songs, or preaching and prophecy.

The Old Covenant as Promises

...in the Covenants have been fulfilled in Christ. He is fulfilled them and now that we are in Christ, the people of God receive the fulfillment as well. The church does not replace Israel in those promises. The church receives the fulfillment by virtue of being in Christ.

The Old Covenant as Mosaic Law

...including the Tablets of Stone, the so-called Ten Commandments, are understood:

To be the temporary, moral, civil and religious code for the nation of Israel until Jesus came. They were added to the Scriptures because of the sinfulness of the world and Israel in particular.

To function as wisdom for us as they help us to see how God ordered the life of His people in the Old Covenant.

To not be the moral code for us since we are not under Law, but under grace, not in sin, but in Christ. We have the life of the Spirit, the Law of Christ including the principles and the precepts of the New Testament to live by.

The New Covenant Reasons

We have died to the Law but are alive to God. Galatians 2:19-21

¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

We are not under the Mosaic Law but under the Law of Christ. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Reflect and Respond

What does all this mean? How does it impact you?

We do not stand under the condemnation of the Law. Romans 8:1-4

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

We must not submit again to the Law's yoke of slavery. Galatians 5:1

¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

We must walk in the Spirit to overcome sin. Galatians 5:16

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

We must not rely on law to deal with sin. Rather we must rely on the power of the resurrection life of Christ in us. Colossians 2:20-3:4

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

