

The Purpose of the Old Testament By Tom Wacaster

“What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made” (Gal. 3:19a). A proper understanding of the role that the Law of Moses played in the overall scheme of redemption is important to an appreciation of the relationship of the Old Law of Moses to the New Law of Christ Jesus. In addition, such an understanding would go a long way toward eliminating foolish appeals to the Old Testament for authority for what we do in worship to God today. Galatians chapter three addresses three important truths regarding that Old Testament Law: (1) Its relationship to the promise, (2) its temporary nature regarding the particulars, and (3) its purpose in the overall scheme of things. Consider each of these.

First, there is the relationship of the Law of Moses to the promise given to Abraham. Paul points out that the Law came “four hundred and thirty years after” the promise (Gal. 3:17). It is impossible, therefore, for the Law to justify. The Law did not “disannul so as to make the promise of none effect.” The argument of Paul is astonishing. The Judaizing teachers were teaching that justification came through the Law of Moses. Their doctrine implied that Abraham was not justified in the sight of God, since the Law came many years after the promise was given to Abraham, and after it was stated that Abraham’s faith “was counted unto him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

Second, the particulars of the Old Testament were “abolished in his flesh...even the law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Eph. 2:15). Christ “blotted out the bond written in ordinances...and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). It is impossible to appeal to the Old Testament for authority in matters of religion today, and at the same time respect the force of the words “blotted out” and/or “abolished.” The particulars of the Old Testament, including all of the ceremonial laws given to Israel, ceased to be binding upon God’s people at the time Jesus died on the cross. Any appeal to that Old Testament for authority in matters pertaining to worship today is equivalent to an appeal to British Law for authority in the upper New England States that constituted the original thirteen colonies.

Third, consider the purpose of the Law in the overall scheme of God’s divine plan. It is to this point that Paul proposed the question in Galatians 3:19: “What then is the law?” Paul was not seeking to answer the question as to what the Law is, but rather why it was given. We might say, “Why then the Law? What purpose does it serve? Is the law, then, to be regarded as nothing? Does it serve no purpose?” To these questions Paul now turns his attention.

The Old Testament Law “was added because of transgressions” (vs. 19b). The Law did not replace the promise, nor was the Law given to somehow complement or complete the promise. “And the law came in besides” (Rom. 5:20) in an attempt to get Israel to recognize the seriousness of sin. The late Guy N. Woods pointed out that it was “not added to complete, but given independently and additionally. It was the apostle’s purpose to show...that the law came along after the promise and was added, not to embellish the promise, but to give man a greater awareness of sin.”¹

The specific purpose for which that Law was “added” was, according to Paul, “because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19). The law was given to point out sin. It was NOT to reveal a way of justification, but a means of teaching and informing with regard to the nature of sin. It did this by showing the consequences of sin. The Law acted as a magnifying glass. That device does not actually increase the number of dirty spots on a garment, but makes them stand out more clearly. In the same manner, the Law magnified sin by showing the full consequence of that sin. Paul put it like this: “I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7). Hence, the Law was designed to bring about a recognition of sin with its consequences. It did this by (1) showing man what God required of them. Without that communication, men could not come to understand their obligation toward the Creator; (2) showing man the nature and extent of sin, and showing how far he has departed from the law; (3) showing the just penalty of sin, thereby revealing the true nature of sin; (4) producing conviction of sin, so as to impress

¹ Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers, vol. 2.*, (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 2001) 176.

upon our minds how bitter transgression is; and (5) showing its inability to justify. Law makes no provisions for forgiveness; it merely passes judgment. If someone is arrested for breaking the speed limit, he is brought before the magistrate, and the fine is imposed. All the law can do is point out what the crime might be and, if violated, impose the penalty for that violation. To illustrate, let me assume I planned to visit some country. I read about some law that forbids the chewing of gum, the violation of which carries a \$500.00 fine. The law has revealed the serious nature of the transgression, thereby giving me fair warning as to the serious nature of the crime.

The practical result of the law, then, was to demonstrate that every man who attempted to keep the law had failed, and stood condemned and in need of justification by some system other than law. That "system" is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.