

# The Many Functions of God

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*Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one.—Gal. 3:19-20*

We established last time that the law came after the promise of God to be gracious to the house of Abraham. God promised free grace, and the Jews were to lean upon this promise for their salvation, knowing that God would mercifully send them a Redeemer, through whom they would obtain remission of their sins. From this, Paul concludes that the law (which came after the promise) did not abolish that which had been ordained and established by God. However, it would be easy to assume that the law was added to strengthen the promise, as if it had been weak in isolation. Indeed, the apostle seems to argue along those lines in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where he says, in the words of Jeremiah, that God would provide a new law—the gospel. The apostle explains that the law given by Moses was imperfect and insufficient for salvation (Heb. 8:7). At first, it might seem that the same could apply here to the law and the promise, that the promise required a finishing touch, as if it were incomplete in and of itself, and needed to be perfected. Otherwise, surely, the law is superfluous? Yet, it would be against all reason to suppose that God would give us this doctrine for no purpose at all!

We must, therefore, give our attention to examining the function of the law, and to discovering to what end it was given, lest we mistakenly assume that the gospel promise was inadequate, and only partially beneficial for salvation. Paul states that God did not intend to provide us with a means of justification or salvation when he sent us his law; it was added, he says, 'because of transgressions'. It was not created simply to keep us on a tight rein (as the saying goes) because of all the evil and depravity in the world; for we have many ordinary laws and statutes which have been formulated to punish crime here on earth. If we were all like angels, blameless and freely able to exercise perfect self-control, we would not need rules or regulations. Why, then, do we have so many laws and statutes? Because of man's wickedness, for he is constantly overflowing with evil; this is why a remedy is required. If we were all healthy, we would have no need of medicine, but man's intemperance means that there will always be diseases, and, therefore, remedies must be sought out. The existence of so many civil laws bears testimony to the fact that we are totally evil and depraved and, therefore, need to be restrained and harnessed. But Paul does not understand the function of the law in this way—he goes much further. He declares that God gave his law in order to expose man's iniquity, which proves, therefore, that this is not a means of salvation! For heat and cold cannot originate from the same source! If a fountain is sweet, we cannot seek bitter water there; likewise, if a fountain is bitter or salted, we must seek elsewhere for sweet water. The same can be applied to the law.

Why, then, was the law given? In order that men could be doubly convicted of their sins before God and realise that their hypocrisy, self-flattery, desire to hide behind excuses, and other such sins are vain and to no avail. Hence, in the fourth chapter to the Romans, and the fifteenth verse, Paul argues that we cannot be justified by the law, since it brings upon us nothing but the wrath of God. (He is referring to God's vengeance.) In a certain sense, it could be said that both life and death proceed from the law. For the law condemns us all and sentences all to death by showing that we are accursed and abominable in God's sight. What folly, therefore, to seek to be justified simply by its observance! Paul also states in the seventh chapter to the Romans, and the eighth verse, that the law actually causes sin to increase! We are already liable to condemnation, even before we have heard the law; as it is written, those who have sinned without the law will nevertheless perish (Rom. 2:12). In

other words, the heathen, although they have no code from which they stray, still have the inner witness of their conscience, which acts as their judge. Thus, men are worthy of damnation well before they are summoned into God's presence and examined, God having taken his place on the judgment throne. Yet those who persist in sinning and offending God believe themselves to be faultless! For we are subject to such self-flattery, that although we are wallowing in sin, our consciences will never once feel ashamed without the law: they will remain dull and insensitive. Instead, we would feel at liberty to do whatever wicked things we desire. But when once we hear the law, we recognise sin, and are forced to humble ourselves before God (or else gnash our teeth like rebels!). God awakens us through the law and leads us to acknowledge our desperate condition. It is like a man whose face is covered with filth; people laugh at him but he does not understand why! If someone were to bring him a mirror, he would be ashamed and steal away to clean off the dirt, but he will only do this when he has discovered his ugliness! Or if a man has some sort of deformity which makes others afraid to look at him, he will not realise that he has such a disfigurement until a mirror is brought before his eyes! The same applies to us: although we are full of evil and iniquity to the extent that heaven and earth are ashamed of us, and God prepares an awful fate for us, we go on our way unperturbed! Why? Because we are unaware of our sin; we are so blinded by our own hypocrisy that we cannot perceive any danger. But the law reveals just who we are, and sets before us the judgment of God. The law teaches us that we will be condemned if we fail to do certain things. And what are these things? It is not simply a matter of guarding our feet, hands, eyes and ears; no, we must keep ourselves pure and free from all covetousness. Our integrity must be such that all our affections, thoughts and desires are centred upon God. We are not to be enticed or led astray by anything in this world. But where can such a person as this be found?

Now God has ascended his throne and sits as judge, and he has pronounced his sentence upon us—we are accursed because we are found to be transgressors, which, indeed, we are. That is the miserable condition of the human race. This is why Paul says in this passage that the law was added 'because of transgressions'. However, the law does have other functions. For example, one of the chief reasons why we need the law is to teach us how we are to worship God. It shows that we are to honour him by our obedience, rather than each person living as a law unto himself! The law helps us to distinguish between good and evil. What is the 'reasonable service' that God deserves? Is it not to submit ourselves to his will, as Paul says in the twelfth chapter to the Romans, verse one? Is this not a most excellent function of the law—to show us how we may please God and what rules we are to obey, rather than for us to be struggling in vain, believing we are serving God when we are not? But when Paul speaks of the law being added for transgressions' sake, he does not intend to give us an account of the uses of the law and the fruits it produces. We have said that the law instructs us, and teaches us to discern between good and evil; it urges us by means of goads, as it were, to give ourselves wholly to God. But Paul is referring to the law in the context of the passage he is expounding, proving that the law is not superfluous, yet, neither is it a means of justification. Indeed, its function is to confound us and reveal that we are sinners in a twofold sense, to convict us of our sin and leave us without excuse. In fact, we soon realise that there is a bottomless pit awaiting us. This is why the law was given: it was added to the promise, not because the latter was powerless without it, unable to bring salvation without assistance from another source; not at all, says Paul! It was added in order that we might realise that God is right to condemn us all, and to give our minds no rest from anxious and tortuous thoughts, in order that our despair might lead us to find hope in his promise.

If we object that the promise could have achieved this alone, the answer to this is very simple. Although God has revealed himself as Saviour, and shown us that we will be condemned unless he has mercy upon us, we cannot respond as we ought unless he first humbles us. Through his promise, he calls us to himself with the tender love of a father. This ought to be sufficient to make us aware of our sins and to make us hate them: yet, we are so comfortable in our sins that we will not give them any thought unless we are coerced. Therefore, after God had made this promise to man, we should have groaned under the burden of sin and sought refuge in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, but we did

not, that is, until God dealt us a few mighty blows with his hammer through the law! Does this not reveal our wickedness, that we abuse God's kindness to us, and use it for an occasion to flatter ourselves? Of necessity, he deals harshly with us, and exposes what we are truly like, to alarm us so that we might run to him for grace. The word 'added' here indicates that Paul is accusing us of despising God's goodness, revealed in his gentle and gracious call. Indeed, we virtually constrain him to use force in order to humble us; only when our wills are thus inclined by force will we seek his grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point, Paul adds that the law applied 'till the seed should come to whom the promise was made'. The 'law' chiefly refers to the ceremonies, although we can also include all the qualities, circumstances and details of the law, as we say. If we take the law to refer only to the Ten Commandments, then what Paul says here is entirely inappropriate! For even today the law carries weight, in that it is our rule for living. It reveals to us the will of God, keeping us from living as vagabonds, aimlessly wandering about from place to place, as it were, for the pathway is set out before us. Therefore, because the law teaches what is right, it is timeless and will endure to the end of the world. It is important for us to enter into the mind of Paul here and realise that he is referring to the promises, curses and ceremonies of the law. On the one hand, we are promised that if a man obeys, 'he shall live in them' (Lev. 18:5). We have already dealt with this. Next, there is the threat: 'Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them' (Deut. 27:26). The law, as we have discovered, only promises salvation to those who have lived pure lives in all integrity. All of us fall short of this and, therefore, the promise does not apply. This is the first point. If we object that God is mocking at men, the answer is, not at all! Rather, we are so full of pride and arrogance that we think we can achieve salvation by ourselves. Therefore, God has to say, 'If you are as virtuous as you think you are, prove it to me. For my part, I have given you my law and I have prepared a reward for you if you obey it. You will not be disappointed if you serve me. Eternal life is promised you, but first you must do your duty—set to work!' Even if men were to attempt to do so with all their might, they would doubtless discover weakness of which they were previously unaware. Thus, the promises of the law do not apply to us, yet, nor are they thwarted, because they serve a rather different purpose.

The curses of the law are infallible. The following text condemns us all: 'Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them.' We are obliged to fulfil them all, and there must not be one single point at which we fail. We are wrong if we believe we can serve God in part; he does not divide up his commandments in this way. He desires the one who is chaste to abstain also from plundering, pillaging, cheating, violence and everything else. Since this is the case, these warnings are binding upon us all, and Paul was aware of this.

Concerning the ceremonies, they serve to highlight our lost condition. We have already referred to what Paul says in Colossians chapter two, and the fourteenth verse, where he describes them as ordinances which are designed to bind us and keep us in place. If a man borrows a sum of money, he then owes it and must pay it back with his own hand. This ought to be sufficient. However, if he secures a mortgage, he is obliged under penalty to pay it back, especially if it be a public matter. This makes his burden greater. The same applies to the ceremonies. The law was sufficient to condemn all mankind, for all have sinned; yet God, seeing the pride that was so deeply rooted in our hearts, added ceremonies to place us under an even more solemn obligation to him. But Paul says that all this was only 'till the seed should come'; in other words, the law cannot harness or restrain those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather, it leads them to faith and they find in Christ all that is lacking in the law! Thus, when God is harsh in his condemnation, it is only to procure our salvation, and the fact that he thunders against us is an evident token of his exceptional grace towards us! How is this? I have already said, and experience bears this out, that we would never stop abusing his kindness to us, using it for our advantage if this were not the case. Therefore, God must arrest us and act as our judge, so that we hear the dreadful sentence and sink in despair. Then we expect no less than eternal death, and this verdict is confirmed and ratified by his law. Yet, all is designed to humble us in order that we

might come to the Lord Jesus Christ with true zeal and in sincerity. Having experienced such anguish and torment in our consciences, we will learn to rest entirely upon him. This is why the law only applied 'till the seed should come'.

If we, then, ask how it was that our forefathers obtained salvation, the answer is that although the law reigned before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with regard to outward things, nevertheless, our fathers still had to rely upon the grace they had been promised (despite the fact that Christ had not yet come). We shall learn more of this presently. Now we have resolved the following point: that the law did not alter the promise, neither was it added to support the promise, as if it had been insufficient alone for salvation. Rather, it was added because of man's pride and arrogance, that we might humbly seek the mercy that is offered us in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that, through him, we might be enabled to receive and enjoy his forgiveness.

At this point Paul mentions that the law 'was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator'. Here he authorises the law and indicates that we are to receive it with all due reverence. However, we are only to apply it in the way that God intended! To make this point, Paul speaks of angels, to demonstrate that God had many witnesses who gave authority to the law and showed how it was to be received and esteemed. But Paul's main object here is to speak of the Mediator—that is to say, the Lord Jesus Christ. Many have thought this was referring to Moses, since he was a mediator between God and man with regard to doctrine. However, this is hardly a suitable interpretation! After all, Paul firstly speaks of angels, and then of the Mediator as their head, the one who holds the position of supreme sovereignty. This cannot be applicable to Moses! Indeed, Paul's argument here is that there is no disparity between the law and the gospel concerning the free promise of salvation. In order to reiterate this, he refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, explaining that when the law was established, it was with his hand and under his leadership. This word 'hand' often implies power in Scripture, and here it is used to draw a contrast between the angels and Jesus Christ himself. Paul mentions the assembled angels because their presence should ensure that the law is heeded by men, and accepted without reservation. The angels were witnesses of God's majesty, yes, but the Mediator is even greater than they! The 'hand' here implies his headship, revealing that he has sovereign authority and, therefore, has the chief commission of ordaining the law. This ought not to seem strange to us; for when the angel appeared to Moses he said, 'I am the Lord' (Exod. 3:6). Yet he is called an angel! This means that he was a messenger of God as the word implies; yet he says in effect, 'I am the Lord, whose being proceeds from myself alone'. This cannot be said of any creature (including the angels) who, like ourselves, were made from nothing! It would have been blasphemy for an angel to usurp such a title, which belongs to God alone. We must, therefore, reach the conclusion that this angel was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, who was already fulfilling his role as Mediator. This, indeed, is borne out by Paul in First Corinthians, chapter ten and verse nine, where he speaks of the rebellion of the Jews in provoking God to anger with their murmurings and foolish lusts. Paul says that they were tempting Christ himself, who led and guided them through the wilderness. Therefore, I have no difficulty in believing that our Lord Jesus Christ was already a mediator, because in many different ways he acted to reconcile men to God the Father. This is why the apostle writes in the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jesus Christ is the same, 'yesterday, and today, and forever', and that we must cleave to him and not be carried about with 'strange doctrines' (Heb. 13:8).

Hence, Paul is teaching us that Jesus Christ mediated between God and man in order that poor sinners might be granted relief from their troubled minds concerning the judgment of God. Now we can rejoice because God has provided a mediator through whom we may obtain grace to approach him. But the Lord Jesus Christ is also a mediator in another sense, and that is that God has always communicated to man through him. For there is such a gulf between God and ourselves, we are so alienated from him through sin, that we cannot have access to him. He can only stoop to us through a mediator. Indeed, is this not what the vision of Jacob teaches us in the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis, verse twelve? It tells us there that Jacob saw a ladder, at the top of which God was enthroned

in majesty, and the angels were ascending and descending on this ladder. There can be no doubt that this image was to reveal to Jacob that we are excluded from the kingdom of God until a means is found to reconcile heaven and earth. In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is 'God manifest in the flesh'; he is higher than the heavens, yet he has identified with us in that he took our nature upon himself and became a man—frail, but without sin. Although he was perfect, he took upon himself our infirmities. This is how it was that the law was ordained by the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, it follows that there can be no contradiction between the law and the gospel, for Jesus Christ never changes and cannot deny himself.

Now let us turn our attention to Paul's next statement. He says 'a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one'. By saying that the Mediator is not 'of one', he implies that the Lord Jesus Christ came to gather together in one all things in heaven and on the earth, as he says in the first chapter to the Colossians (Gal. 1:20). Some have understood this text to mean that Jesus Christ had more than one nature; others, that if he is the Mediator for all mankind, it follows that there can be no disharmony between the law and the gospel. However, Paul is clearly referring to the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles here! In effect he is saying, 'Yes, Jesus Christ was Mediator when the law was set forth, that God might humble men through him to the end that they might receive his grace. But let us notice that, although he was already Mediator when he presented the law to the Jews, his office was to extend much further, since he was also to gather the Gentiles who were cut off from God. For though, for a time, God chose the descendants of Abraham above the rest of humanity, yet at the end of time he has made us partakers of the salvation from which we were once estranged. Those of us who were afar off have been welcomed in alongside those who were previously close to God.' Indeed, in that other passage, Paul calls Jesus Christ 'our peace', since he has reconciled and united to God both those who were already near (the Jews) and those who had no knowledge of God (Eph. 2:17). We have been accepted into the body of his church because of Christ's coming. Those who were once separated by a great distance have been united, not only with God, but with one another.

Now we understand Paul's teaching in this passage, but in order to profit from all we have considered, there is a specific lesson we ought to learn from this one fact: that God gave us his law through angels. That is, that these same angels will be witnesses against us if we ignore or pass by the law, or trample it underfoot, as it were. Thus, the angels will have the right to ask God to avenge our ungodly rebellion. When God chose angels to assist him in the setting forth of his law, he was not playing games; rather it was in order that we might reverence the law. Yes, it is true, we cannot perfectly fulfil what it demands; however, if we were to stop there, we would be totally engulfed in despair, and remain under the sentence of eternal death. If God has graciously taught us his will and enabled us to discern between good and evil, our response ought to be to bow our necks to receive the yoke that God places upon us, a response of submission to him. This is the first point. Secondly, the law is designed to prompt and prick our consciences, because we are so cold, lethargic and inactive that we would never come to God of our own accord. The law, therefore, should cause each one of us to examine ourselves; indeed, for our own instruction, we would do well to commit to memory the commandments of God and recite them morning and evening.

Let us, therefore, keep ourselves on a tighter rein, since the angels observe and watch over us. Having been employed by God to establish the law, they will not allow us to despise it, or to put it to an open shame as if it were worthless. Furthermore, the law is there to condemn us, and we will receive this condemnation in the presence of these same angels, regardless of how much men may have praised and applauded us. Even if the whole world were on our side, it would count for nothing. For why, then, would God have chosen to have his angels there to assist with the publication of his law, if not to teach us to be ashamed of our sinfulness, humble ourselves willingly and seek salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ?

As for the Lord Jesus Christ being the Mediator of the law, we can be sure that if we have

sought refuge in his grace, the law no longer has the power to condemn us, nor to cause sin to have dominion over us. For we must bear in mind what Paul wrote in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter fifteen, and the fifty-sixth verse: 'the strength of sin is the law'. The law sharpens sin, as it were, leaving us mortally wounded. Therefore, if we do not enjoy the consolation spoken of here, we will surely be seized with terror and have no assurance of salvation, despite the promises made by the Lord Jesus Christ. We will constantly be weighing these truths which seem so contradictory, saying, 'Surely the law came from God? Yet God condemns us through it! Although he sent the Lord Jesus Christ to be the remedy, there does not appear to be any way of escaping its sentence!' Thus, we will be tormented by such thoughts. But if we consider that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Mediator who established the law, we realise that if he is our Advocate today, he is able to forgive us. Thus, we do not have to be counted amongst the lost. Yes, God has indeed pronounced his curse upon us, and we have been oppressed by the torment and anguish that this has created. Our evil does at first seem to be incurable, but we know that our Lord Jesus Christ is able to fulfil both roles: that is, to teach us humility through such terrifying thoughts, and yet also to assure us of salvation. Thus, when we are cast down in this way, the only way to be raised up is to recognise that the One who was established as the Mediator of the law has been revealed to us today in this same office of Mediator, as some of us can testify from our own experience.

Finally, let us notice that he is not the Mediator for one nation alone, but for the whole world because we are all God's creatures. Yes, by the sin of Adam we were all cut off, but the Lord Jesus came to gather together things in heaven and things on earth, as we have already discussed (Col. 1:20). This being the case, we should never doubt that God accepts us today as heirs of his promise, because he sees us as the spiritual children of Abraham. And although we are living in days very different from the time of the ceremonial law, which divided some people from others, this does not prevent us from being able to approach God with boldness. How is this? Because 'God is one'. There may be Jews and Greeks, and many other different nations, with a variety of languages, morals and ways of life, and certainly each individual is full of inconsistencies and subject to change, with no firm anchorage; but let us all learn to fix our eyes upon God, for he is one. He has given us his law and his gospel; let us not think that there is any contradiction between them, for they are in perfect harmony. Let us, rather, be led by these means to come to the Lord Jesus Christ. And how can we do this? Only when we are stripped of all pride, and feel that horror and repugnance that makes us detest ourselves upon the realisation that we are spiritually dead. Then we will come to the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that God the Father accepts us if we come in his appointed way. Why? For he is one. When he gave us his law, he did not intend to diminish the authority of the promise which preceded it. When he revealed his grace more fully in the gospel, it was not because he considered the law worthless or invalid, for it provides us with a rule for living. Thus, to avoid being under its curse, the law teaches us that the only escape is found in that Seed which was promised at the beginning of time, and in whose hands our salvation is secure; that is, in the Lord Jesus Christ—the fountain and source of all blessing.

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and asking him to make us increasingly conscious of them, that we might detest them. May we not only confess them with our lips, but may our hearts also be in full submission to God's Holy Word. May his free grace comfort us, as it has been revealed to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. May his Holy Spirit continually transform us, in order that if we are full of rebellion, he may bring us under his control and make us meek, ready to follow his holy will and devote ourselves completely to him. We pray for all these things, saying, Almighty God, and our heavenly Father, etc