Why the law? Galatians 3:19-20

Why does Paul ask this question? Can I suggest you approach these two verses by rereading Galatians 3:1-18. What has Paul said in these verses that calls into question the validity or purpose of the law? Do you find yourself asking the question, ‘Why the law?’ in the light of what Paul has just said about the law?

According to most translations, Paul’s initial answer to the question is that the law was added because of transgressions. However, this explanation has been understood in different ways. In his commentary on Romans (p.138), Richard Longenecker suggests that ‘the phrase “because of transgressions” may mean either that the law was given to bring about a knowledge of sin (cf. Rom 3:20) by identifying it as transgression before God (cf. Rom 4:15; 5:13; 7:7), or that the law was given to increase and multiply sin (cf. Rom 5:20).’ Well, maybe. Paul’s audience in Galatia would not have been able to cross-reference his letter to Rome to understand of what he meant. Maybe he just meant that the law was added because people sinned. What do you think?

However, Paul goes on to indicate that the law had a specific role for what looks like a limited period of time (3:19). Who is the seed or offspring that Paul refers to here? What was the promise made to that seed or offspring? Compare and contrast the way in which the law addressed the problem of human transgression before this seed/offspring came, and the way in which our transgressions have now been dealt with by this seed or offspring of Abraham.

In the last part of Galatians 3:19, Paul says that the law was put in place through angels in the hand of a mediator, or intermediary. This mediator would have been Moses. You won’t find specific references in scripture to angels being involved in the law being put in place, though their presence at Mount Sinai, where Moses received the law, is implied (Deuteronomy 33:2; Psalm 68:17). The rhetorical effect of Paul’s language here is to distance God from the giving of the law. Whereas God spoke directly to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), Paul here points out that the people received the law via an intermediary, who in turn received it from angels, and if the angels received the law from God, then Paul does not mention God here.

The impression that he wants to leave God out of the picture is reinforced by the highly compressed imagery he uses in Galatians 3:20. It has been said that there are hundreds of different ways of understanding this obscure verse! However, to my mind, the simplest way of making sense of Paul’s words is the understand that he saw the role of a mediator as being akin to that of a negotiator, and according to the Cambridge Dictionary, a negotiator is ‘someone who tries to help two groups who disagree to reach an agreement with each other’. If this interpretation is correct, then Paul is making the point that a negotiator/mediator always acts to represent the interests of a group, or a party. Individuals do not need someone to negotiate on their behalf because they can speak for themselves. Paul’s point then, is that because God is one, God does not need someone to negotiate on his behalf. But if Moses acted as a mediator in passing on the law to the people his role was only necessary because he received the law from angels (a group), and not directly from the one God. This may look and feel like a tendentious argument to us. It may be that Paul was responding to a claim by the false teachers that the law was all the more glorious because angels were involved in its transmission. We simply don’t know. But the point is this. In order to counter the teachers who were telling the Galatians that they needed to submit to the Jewish law, Paul distances God from the giving of the law, and assigns to the law a specific function, limited to the period before Christ came.

How do you feel about Paul’s extremely negative assessment of the law in this letter? It’s important to remember that Paul was writing with one specific purpose in mind: to dissuade his converts in Galatia from following the Jewish teachers who were telling them that they had to be circumcised and keep the Jewish law. Pauls’ response was to write an angry, highly polemical letter. He has no idea that his words would be incorporated into the canon of scripture and accorded the same authority as what we know as the Old Testament. We get a more nuanced view of the law in his letter to the Romans. How does understanding this affect how you approach reading Galatians?

According to John Calvin (*Institutes* 2.7.6-12), the law serves three purposes:

* **First,** by exhibiting the righteousness of God,—in other words, the righteousness which alone is acceptable to God,—it admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness...and finally condemns him.
* **The second** office of the Law is, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice.
* **The third use:** it is the best instrument for enabling believers daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow…by frequently meditating upon it, they will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin.

Do you agree with Calvin? Do you think Paul would have agreed with Calvin?

Not the labour of my hands

Can fulfil Thy law’s demands;

Could my zeal no respite know,

Could my tears forever flow,

All for sin could not atone:

Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Augustus Montague Toplady