

Not Law but Promise Galatians 3

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon contrasts the law and promise, showing that the promise is the ground of righteousness and the source of blessing, while the law is a system of human responsibility.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 22:16-18, John 1:17, Romans 3:20, Romans 7:6, Galatians 3:10-14, Galatians 3:19, Galatians 3:26-29, Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 11:8-10

Topics: "Grace and Righteousness", "Law vs. Promise"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the stark contrast between the law and the promise in Galatians 3, illustrating that the law brings a curse while the promise offers grace and blessing. He explains that the law, which demands human obedience, cannot provide righteousness or life, whereas the promise, given to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, is based on faith and God's grace. Darby argues that the coexistence of law and promise is impossible, as they represent two distinct systems of God's dealing with humanity. He highlights that righteousness comes through faith in Christ, who bore the curse of the law, allowing believers to receive the blessings of the promise. Ultimately, Darby calls for a clear understanding of our relationship with God, which is rooted in grace rather than obligation to the law.

Transcript

The way in which the law is placed in contrast with promise and faith in Galatians 3 is very striking. It is not merely that man is a sinner and that there is a judgment (a truth so solemnly revealed in Scripture), nor is it the operation of the law, experimentally known as spiritually bringing death into the conscience, as we find it opened out in Romans 7. The law and promise in grace are brought before us as two systems, both of God, but contrasted in their nature and opposite in their effects, and absolutely exclusive one of the other; existing at separate times, though the second could not disannul the first, and whose co-existence, as the ground of man's standing with God, is in their very nature impossible. Both are positive dealings and revealed ways of God with man, each of its own kind. Man had been turned out of paradise for sin, and he is an outcast from God and all intercourse with Him, such as he once had upon earth. This is his state; but it is no special revelation to him in that state. A judgment* awaits him too. This will hereafter shew God's righteous way with sin, and natural conscience bears the reflex of it within, in spite of all the sinner's efforts to get rid of it. It is to come, however; not a present dealing with man or a revelation by which he is placed in a special relationship with God according to the terms of that revelation. He has to answer as a fallen sinner for his conduct - terrible but righteous truth! but he is in no present revealed relationship with God. Not so where the promise or the law has come in. Then man has as a present thing

to do with God according to the terms revealed by Him. These are of two kinds, as here brought forward - promise and law; only we have to add, that the Seed to whom the promise was made is now come, and has accomplished the work of redemption for the heirs according to promise.

{*It is well to remark here, that judgment is always and necessarily condemnation, whenever it is entered into so as to pronounce on the acceptance, or otherwise, of a man in consequence of his conduct. For this reason God cannot judge His own work, as He created it. It would be judging His own competency as a workman or Creator. He saw it all, and behold it was very good. Now, if man has left his first estate and got away into sin by self-will, and has thus given occasion to the existence of judgment on him, what can judgment be but condemnation? That is, there is no judgment if man be not departed from the state God put him in. If he be, judgment as such must be condemnation. What grace may do is another thing. Hence the really awakened conscience says, Enter NOT into judgment with thy servant, O Lord, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.}

300 The Galatians were not rejecting the promise or Christ; but they were adding the law to Christ as completing God's will. This it is that the apostle resists, and declares the incompatibility of the two. Not that the law was against the promises (for if a law had been given which could have given life, righteousness would have been by it); but that the one system was in fact opposite in its principle to the other. They were two distinct ways proposed for having life, righteousness, and the inheritance. One brings a curse and nothing else; the other a blessing after God's own heart, and nothing else. One is founded on man's responsibility, the other on God's gift, when man had failed altogether under that responsibility.

The best way I can treat the subject is to follow the contrast the chapter presents, and then unfold, as clearly as I can from Scripture, the positive doctrine on which our present state, as "delivered from the law," is founded.

First, then, as to the contrast, they did not obey the truth as to the cross if they annexed the law to Christ. The law applied to life in the flesh and its obligations. The cross declares its condemnation and end in death, and death to it. They had not received the Spirit by law but by faith. They had had the Spirit, had begun in it when they had not the law at all, and they were now looking to be made perfect through the latter, but this was by the flesh; for the law supposed flesh to be alive and applied to it. Further, he who shewed the power of the Spirit, and ministered it, did it, not by the works of the law but by the report of faith. But it was admitted by the few that the blessing was in Abraham. But he got it by faith, and was counted righteous by it without any law at all - not only without it, but on a contrary principle. They which are of faith (that is, who stand on this principle before God) are blessed with faithful, that is, believing Abraham. Now the law is not on this principle. The law is not of faith but on the principle of doing - getting the blessing by doing. But that is not faith.

And remark more than this: not only is the blessing by faith, not by law, not on this principle, and the accomplishment by oneself or another of the law, but as many as are on this principle - as many as stand on the ground of their obligation to keep the law - are under the curse. "As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse." The works of the law are not bad works; they are right works, loving God and our neighbour, and not breaking the commandments which forbid sin. But they that are of the works of the law (that is, that are placed or place themselves under the obligation of the law, of doing these works) are under the curse. He does not say he who has broken the law, he who sins, he who has done evil, but he who is of the works of the law, who goes upon the principle of being under its obligation, and bound to accomplish it, is under the curse.

301 Nor is there a hint of any one's keeping it for us, so that we should not be under the curse when we are under the law. All that are of the works of the law ARE under the curse; because, according to its declaration, everyone is so that has not kept it. And no man under it has kept it, for he is in flesh; and this is not subject to it nor can be. He must get off this ground to escape its curse. But this can be only by death. The Jew was under it, and all else would have been condemned as lawless had they not come under it then; but, for every one who believed of those who were, Christ took the curse on the cross. It is not pretended that He kept it for them, so that the curse was not needed for their breaking it, because another had kept it for them, for then He had not needed to bear its curse. No: the curse of its head remained there and was borne on the cross; and thus they were redeemed from it, and then, the whole system of God under law being closed and the middle wall of partition broken down, the blessing of Abraham (which was of faith) could flow forth on the Gentiles who had faith. It could not till then. While God maintained the obligation of the law as a dispensed system among men, the Gentile must have submitted to it and become a Jew as to law if not as to race, he must have submitted to its obligation, while God maintained it. But the dispensation of law had now closed by the death of Christ, and the blessing of the promise by faith could flow forth to them who believed.

This brings forward another point in the argument: the historical part of it. A subsequent act cannot disannul, even amongst men, a solemnly confirmed covenant. Now God had given the promise to Abraham without law, and confirmed it to Christ 430 years before the law came. This therefore could not disannul the previously confirmed promise, nor alter its terms. It could not be disannulled, and it could not be added to. It must be fulfilled as it was given.

302 Now God had given the inheritance to Abraham by promise. But if of law it was not of promise. And mark, this is the truth for us. It is not of law, not on that principle. If it be, it is not of promise. But as given of God, it is of promise. The two systems are contradictory in their nature. The inheritance could not be by both; but it was first given by promise, and the law coming after could not make this of none effect.* What was then the use of the law? It was added to produce transgressions - not to produce sin, for sin was there. But law made sin transgression. It entered that the offence might abound. Sin by the commandment became exceeding sinful. But it could not interfere with the promise to the Seed. The promise was prior to and independent of it. It was added, till the Seed should come. This is a very distinct and clear statement. Putting man under law was a temporary expedient, though a most righteous one, and founded on principles of everlasting truth in itself; namely, human responsibility and a perfect rule for it. But it was a principle which with a sinner (and man was a sinner), could only bring a curse, and was meant to bring it, not as the final or abiding way of God, but to bring man's position clearly out by raising the question how righteousness was to be found or obtained. The law was given by Moses. The law was right, essentially right; but it was after the promise, and until the Seed. It was never God's way of man's obtaining righteousness. It was addressed to sinners. It convicted of sin and made it exceeding sinful. Righteousness is not by law, nor is life, nor the inheritance.

{*The following verses, which often perplex readers, when viewed in connection with this are easy to understand. God is one: the promise was to Christ the Seed. Its fulfilment depended therefore only on God. In the case of the law there was a mediator, which implied another than God, who was also to get the inheritance on the terms of his own obedience. Hence it did not rest simply on God's faithfulness to His promise, but on man's obedience.}

If indeed a law had been given which could have given life, then righteousness would have been by it. But no such law was given. Righteousness could not be and was not by it. Scripture has concluded all under

sin that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. The doing that man may live, the keeping of the law, is not the way of righteousness. It was used for a time to bring man more fully under the conviction of sin. Righteousness never was, is not, and never will be, for sinful man on this principle. He was tried under it for a time, to bring sin clearly out; and then the promise resumed its indefeasible rights in the person to whom the promise was made; and righteousness and the inheritance stood on entirely other ground. Before faith came (that is, the principle of Christianity and grace), the Jews were kept under law, shut up to the faith to be revealed. After faith came, they are not under the schoolmaster - not under law at all - delivered from it - hence not held to it as an obligation; for I cannot be obliged by that which I am not under. Nor has another to fulfil therefore the obligation because I have failed to fulfil it, because we are not under it. We are sons, that is, in direct communion with the Father; if we are taking the pedagogue's orders as between us and Him, we are not.

303 Such then is the elaborately reasoned out contrast between these two ways of God: law, dealing with the responsibility of man; and promise, declaring the gift of God. The one claims, and is founded on the principle of doing on man's part, so as to make out righteousness in man, of which the law was the measure; the other is characterised by believing God, and that being the ground of counting a man righteous, not his doing, or responsibility to do, anything. With this the law in its nature could have nothing to do. It is not of faith, but of doing, whoever does it. But we are not righteous on this principle. They are both ways of God, both right, but one brings a curse, the other the blessing. In a word they are contradictory in nature and in principle. Further, they were mutually exclusive of each other. The promise could not be disannulled nor added to by any after act. The law was merely added temporarily till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made. When once the system of faith came, those previously under law were no longer so at all, nor consequently responsible to or under obligation in respect of it. It was no longer at all presented as a ground on which man had to stand with God. If we* are not under obligation to it ourselves, no one had to undertake to fulfil it in our stead, to make good our failures under it, for we are not under it. The righteousness of God is come in.

{*It may be well for the reader to remark that "we" is often used for Jews here as in other parts of scripture. They were under the curse of the law. Christ was made a curse for them (Jewish believers) that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles. The legal curse being done away, which was connected with Jews and the law, the original promise could flow freely out on Gentiles that we (Jewish and Gentile believers) might receive the Spirit.

Hence in verse 23 he says, We were kept under the law; but in verse 26, Ye are all the children of God, for the Gentiles were too. The law had run up to the cross and the curse, but could go no farther. The promise and blessing flowed forth on Jew and Gentile through faith. Hence the statement of verses 27-29. So in the beginning of Ephesians 2. If any one now puts himself under law, they put themselves under the curse; for the law is not an arbitrary enactment, but a real moral one, so that its judgment is felt to be righteous in the conscience. But then it is condemnation and death, and there is no hope at all. They are fallen from grace. Christ is become of no effect for them. So far is He from fulfilling the law for us when we break it, that, for him who is under it, Christ is become of no effect.}

304 Let us turn now to God's ways in promise. The earliest revelation of God (on the fall) was a declaration that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. It was not a promise to Adam, but a revelation of another than him, who should destroy the power which he, by his unfaithfulness, had let in to rule on the earth. On this, individual faith could rest, and we know did rest, in the Enochs and the Noahs; we may trust in Adam himself and many others of his posterity. Still the world grew desperate in

wickedness, and God determined to destroy what He had created, and brought in the flood upon this world of the ungodly. The world began anew, and alas! it was soon seen, sin with it. But God would not allow that they should be unrestrained. Man built the tower to have his own way, and not be dispersed; and God confounded his language and dispersed the race, forming countries, and tongues, and languages. Mighty hunters there might be, and have been; but a divided world and antagonistic races. But the world had gone away from God and, as we know from Joshua, had begun to worship demons. And now Abraham is called. There was no law, no condition, no righteousness, no requirement of it. He is called to break with and quit the providential order which God Himself had established in the world, his country, and his kindred, and his father's house. Country was that new thing of God's establishment, which His judgment on Babel had formed - God's order in the world. Abraham was to leave it; not to act against it, but to be apart from it for God in the world. This was a most important point, and becomes so the more we examine it. It takes Abraham up on ground independent of the common responsibility of men. The world lay under it; sin was there, and a judgment to come. Grace here works. Abraham is called out from among them, and separated from them, and positive revealed blessing is deposited there, and entirely and exclusively there.

305 This was an immense fact. It is not man responsible and liable to judgment. It is not merely grace working, so that a man may have, individually, share in divine life, and divine favour, and heaven; but one called publicly out from the whole system of God, and made the head of a race (now a spiritual one), and all blessing deposited in him, and wholly in him. This was a new thing on the earth. In a general way one may look at Israel as the natural seed according to the promise, but the details of that part of the history need not detain us here. They were according to flesh, and the seed of promise was definitely to be accounted heir.

But it is this principle itself which is important. Grace calls out one to be the head of a new race, in which the blessing of God was to be "the blessing of Abraham." This had nothing to do with judging on the footing of responsibility; or any rule or measure given on which that judgment was to be founded. This may be a deeper motive for faithfulness and service than any other, but so it is. But it is one called out from a responsible world which is under judgment for its failure not to give an exact rule by which that failure can be measured, but to set sovereign blessing in him, and by subsequent revelations, in his Seed. As Adam was the head of a sinful and condemned race, Abraham was the head of a blessed race, of whom it could be said, "now are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise." This, by grace, will be true even of Israel in its day; they tried to have it by the works of the law and so lost it, but God will, for all that, faithful to Himself, accomplish His promises. But this for the moment I pass by.

It suffices to point out here the position of Abraham, called to be the deposit and stock of promise and blessing, "Get thee out of thy country and out of thy kindred, and out of thy father's house, to a land that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and thou shalt be a blessing. Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee, and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Blessing characterised his calling. He is blessed and a blessing. Blessing is measured out by dispositions towards him. And he is the one source of blessing to all the families of the earth. This is a very remarkable position and a most blessed, and, in its character, a divine one, which we shall do well to consider as regards ourselves. I will suggest a word or two in a moment. But, remark here how divine a one it is in its nature. God is blessedness in Himself. It characterises Him. He is the source of it to all who have any. This was, derivatively, just Abraham's place. He was made blessed, in this sense had blessedness on the earth, distinctively and especially so; he was the source of it to all the families of the

earth. If there was a curse, it was only for enmity to this. This is a most precious, and in character divine, place for a creature; a creature blessed no doubt, and quickened of God; but thence only the more precious because the more real.

306 Thus the place of blessing is definitively settled as of pure grace without law - grace abounding over the whole sinful condition of man, and flowing from and measured by the self-originated fulness of divine love, of which it was the display and revelation. This is what characterised it in Abraham - grace putting man in a divine place of blessing

But this comes more distinctly and blessedly out when we proceed to consider the way in which it was accomplished.

It was confirmed* to the Seed, that is, to Christ; and that, as we shall see, by an obedience and in a way far beyond all legal obedience which might have fulfilled the duties incumbent on the first Adam, and been contained authoritatively as duties in the law. The promise was given to Abraham in chapter 12. It is confirmed to the seed in chapter 22, after Isaac had been offered up. Abraham was called to surrender all he loved, all the promises where God had deposited them; for in Isaac his seed was to be called; an entire surrender of self - "thine only son, whom thou lovest" - and of all even that God had given him, as founded on life in this world, in the seed he had received of God according to promise. He must reckon on God alone and resurrection, and give up all in life down here. And he does. Isaac is surrendered in devotedness to God, and God trusted for promise which must be in resurrection. This was all out of the very reach and nature of law. It was not the claims of obedience to legal righteousness in man, but absolute surrender of self and righteousness and all to God. All was offered up in sacrifice. Law obeyed is life accomplishing its duties. This was the surrender of self and promises and all to God - the sacrifice of all to God. It was the well-known figure of Christ's offering up Himself (only in Him it was really accomplished) and rising from the dead. Then, not till then, the promise was confirmed to the seed. That is, the promise was confirmed to Christ on the ground of an obedience infinitely above all law, and as having passed through death (and law has power over a man only as long as he lives), and as risen from the dead, and to us in Him.

{*To Christ, not "in Christ."}

307 In the meanwhile (but 430 years after the promise, as we have seen, and hence leaving it in full vigour) the law came in, and required human obedience to the exact rule of righteousness: in a word, it declared (under pain of God's curse for failure) all that man ought, as such, to be and to do. It came in by the bye to bring out transgression, it made sin exceeding sinful, and, from the inability of man to establish righteousness for himself before God, it brought him under the curse. The authority of this righteous claim could not be disregarded, and Christ bore its curse; that, while maintaining its authority, the curse brought by it might be removed. His death, which met and satisfied its curse, took from under it all that are in Him. For they died with Him in that in which they were held, and rose in the liberty in the which He had made them free, the law having no further claim or dominion over them as risen which it held as long as they lived. But they had died and were now risen, to bring forth fruit to God, in connection with their new husband, Christ risen from the dead. Hence too sin had not dominion over them, because they were not under law but under grace.

Thus man's righteousness, which, if there had been any, would have been under law, was out of the question. The curse had been the fruit of the trial. The Scripture had concluded all under sin.

308 But the obedience of Christ, spotless and blameless under law as He had been, went infinitely farther than law, and indeed was on another principle. It was the voluntary surrender of self and life to glorify God. That self and life, which law would direct, and the love of which became the measure of love to others, was wholly given up. The curse and wrath due under law and to sin were undergone. "Therefore," could Christ say, "doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I might take it again." Of this the law knew nothing. It was absolute obedience in the total surrender and devotedness of self to God's glory and purposes and our salvation. And God was glorified in Him: God was, and hence God has glorified Him in Himself. And man is entered into the glory which the Son had with the Father before the world was, and is entered righteously. God has displayed His righteousness in setting Christ, the man who had glorified Him, at His right hand. Thus divine righteousness is established in giving Christ the glory which He deserved through His work for us. But then we must be in this place of glory, for it was for us He did it, and He must see of the travail of His soul in bringing into His own glory those whom His Father had given Him. We wait therefore for the hope of righteousness by faith, the hope that belongs to righteousness; and what that is we see in the glory into which Christ has entered, where the righteousness of God has placed Him as man.

Thus grace could reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It was a glorifying God in the giving up Himself, and that to death, and the curse, and wrath, through the Eternal Spirit offering Himself up without spot to God, and God in righteousness setting Him in glory at His right hand. Thus man took this place in righteousness, according to the purpose of God, we being made sharers therein by grace; and now, having seen the full result in glory founded on righteousness through Christ, let us see what the blessing is.

It is the fruit of God's promise to Christ, the Seed. Whatever God's heart could do to shew His love, and that, His love to Christ, and according to the claim Christ had on it, that is the blessing. God, in whom is blessedness, was shewing how He could bless, as in Ephesians 2, that in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. Christ was the One to be blessed. He was the Seed to whom the promise was made. He was the One who - sin being come in - had established God's glory in love, majesty, righteousness, truth, inevitable judgment, salvation, as no innocence could have given occasion to; yet at His own cost. Hence man is in glory. The blessing is the Father's love to Christ, and the glory in which He is, in virtue of that and of having glorified His Father. Such is the place into which we are brought by faith. He in Himself, in Person, the only-begotten, is the Firstborn - as re-entered into glory - of many brethren. He brings many sons to glory.

309 This blessedness we have in the present sense of divine love; the love of God shed abroad in our hearts; God dwelling in us and we in Him; the consciousness, through the Holy Ghost, that we are in Christ and Christ in us; in the consciousness that we are sons, through the Spirit of His Son sent forth into our hearts, crying, Abba Father; the looking for glory, to be like Him and with Him; the consciousness of the Father's love resting on us as on Jesus. More than the promise of the Father to Christ, shewing His love to the Son, and having our place in Him before the Father and enjoying His own love, we cannot think of. God has made Christ as Man, and us in Christ, the pattern of what His blessing in love is. As it was said of Joseph, "In thee shall Israel bless, God make thee like Ephraim and Manasseh."

And this fulness of love constituting our blessedness flows forth in love in the expression of it to brethren; and to sinners it flows out. "Thou shalt be a blessing; and in thee shall men be blessed."

How brightly does the consciousness of this shine in Paul! "Would to God that not only thou, but all who hear me this day" (there was overflowing uncalculating love) "were" - what? - "not only almost but altogether such as I am, save these bonds." There was the consciousness of such blessedness that the best thing divine love could wish was that they might be as he was. Oh what true consciousness of blessedness, what genuine love! Oh, how different in spirit, temper, tone, foundation in righteousness, divine outflowings of grace, the love of God satisfying itself in good, from "Do this and live," were it even done!

There is righteousness, but not man's, under the law, whoever has accomplished it, but God's in setting Christ at His right hand in glory, who had given up Himself and all promised, as come in the flesh, for God the Father's glory, according to the everlasting purpose of blessing and displaying Himself in blessing; of which Christ, the promised Seed, first of all was the object; then, if we are Christ's, we also are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise. And how the divine Person of Christ comes out to view in this! For God, in a certain sense, was debtor to Him for the maintenance of His glory - yea, for the only full bringing it out in redemption. So that, as we have seen, He righteously enters into it as man. But to whom can God be debtor in any sense? Who can make a "therefore" for God to act upon or love? But Christ in the divine counsels has.

I conclude, then, that life, righteousness, and the inheritance do not come under law, nor by the law: I cannot have righteousness by it, nor be under it at all, if I have it by Christ according to promise. Nor have I righteousness by any one's fulfilling it for me, for then it would be under and by the law; but if righteousness come by the law, then CHRIST IS DEAD IN VAIN.

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