

AMAZING GRACE – Part 7*'The Law and the Promise (1)'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Apostle Paul found himself defending the gospel of God's amazing grace many times to Jews and also to Gentile unbelievers. Some of the most powerful teaching in our possession comes from Paul's letters to people who should know better in the Church. He rebukes the Corinthians for their abuse of the freedom which is theirs in Christ. He is scathing in his letter to the Galatians because their acceptance of false teaching had destroyed the very freedom that Jesus died to give them.

The Jewish believers had a problem with Paul's teaching on grace because they and their forefathers had been working their tails off for generations to obey the Holy Law of God. They had questions like: 'Where does the law fit in? If we are all justified by trusting God alone and not by keeping the law, then why was Israel put under the law in the first place?'

Both Paul and the writer of Hebrews try to answer these questions. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul not only has to hammer home the priority of grace over law, but he also has to explain God's use of the law in the first place. Paul was a Jew and so he knew how controversial his teaching was, but for the sake of the gospel of Christ and the freedom of the believers, he had to totally undo the teaching of the religious leaders of that day. Paul knew that to mix a little law with grace destroys grace and in so doing, they rendered Christ's death meaningless. (Galatians 2:21).

Either Jesus is your *everything* – your justification, your sanctification, your abundant life irrespective of your performance, or He is nothing! It's law or it's grace, but it can never be a little bit of both. Contrary to the impression he may have given them, Paul had a very high view of the law of God. He poses the question he intends to answer: *What then is the purpose of the law?* (Galatians 3:19a). Let's look at the setting of this teaching first.

Paul had planted the Church in Galatia on a foundation of God's grace which came through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The theme of his message was: *in Christ*. He preached that forgiveness of sin is found *in Christ*; a new relationship with God is found *in Christ*; life after death, and more importantly – abundant life before death, is found *in Christ*; Further to that, he emphasised that this was all a free gift from God, experienced by us when we simply believe the gospel. The liberating gospel of grace itself births in us the love and acceptance of God through the Holy Spirit.

After Paul had left that region, some other teachers followed him. They were probably converted Jews from the Jerusalem Church who had received Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but they felt that they ought to hang on to the Law as well. Old habits die hard. They saw Christianity as nothing more than an updated version of Judaism. Effectively they were saying:

"We are here to follow up and build on what Paul has taught you. He was absolutely right in saying that you need Jesus. That's essential, that's how you get started in the Christian life, salvation is found in no other ... but what he failed to tell you is that in addition to accepting Jesus and His atoning work for you, you need to follow certain religious laws and rules."

The Church in Galatia allowed these well-meaning teachers to destroy the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ as they opened the door for religion again.

As we have already discussed, whenever this happens the focus shifts from God and His finished work in Christ and turns to our performance which is never finished and never good enough. Relationship is replaced by religion and the more we work in order to please God, the more we suppress the life of Jesus Christ in us and through us, thereby suppressing and effectively rejecting the very substance of the Christian faith.

Paul seeks to explain why their acceptance of the law is a repudiation of the grace of God. He turns to their history to establish for them that grace, the promise of God, came first – it was a covenant established and secure forever. So the law, which was given later, was for a purpose other than relating us to God. The law came not to replace grace and faith, but to highlight their necessity. This is what the religious leaders that Paul addressed could not understand.

Galatians 3:15-18 *“... let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed’, meaning one person, who is Christ.*

What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise (that you can be saved by grace, through faith). For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in His grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”

The covenant of grace was made by God with Abraham and his Seed – meaning his descendant in the flesh, through Mary - Jesus the Christ, the seed, singular. Abraham is dead and gone. But his offspring, Jesus is alive and here right now. We can be in Christ, the living seed, and we can have a living, justified relationship with God in Him.

Paul goes on to say:

Galatians 3:19 *“(The law) was added because of transgressions until the Seed to Whom the promise referred to had come.”*

The law was given to define sin, to tell us how God feels about it and to set out the consequences of sin. Before the law was given, people would have felt bad about sin but they didn't know how awful sin really was. For instance, the law told them that it's not just inconvenient to have someone steal your wife, it's also a dreadful sin with terrible consequences.

Galatians 3:21-23 *“Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.”*

The law lets us know that we are prisoners of sin. The law is good in that it's true and right, but bad in the sense that it curses us all!

Galatians 3:10-11 *“All who rely on observing the laws are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”*

Everybody feels that curse, Christian or not. Modern society wants to get away from the guilt, shame and misery revealed in and inflicted by the law, so we say that everything is relative and we compose a hierarchy of sins. Taking the law away or softening it will not make us feel better, because it cannot change the reality of sin. It does not give us salvation; it cannot give us life or a right standing with God. The law makes us ready for the day when Someone says to us:

Matthew 11:28 *“Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.”*

Galatians 3: 13-14 *“Christ redeemed us from the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*

Romans 6:23 *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.”*

As John reminded us in the most quoted verse in the Bible, God so loved His broken, fallen, twisted, rebellious children, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever BELIEVES in Him should not perish because of their sin, but have everlasting life. That’s why the law was given before Christ came to die. The law was ‘put in charge of us.’

Galatians 3:23-24 *“Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”*

The RSV translation says the law was made a *custodian* of us. Other translations say the law was made our *tutor*. The Greek word, translated in these different ways is *paidagogos*, from which we get the English word, pedagogue. Wealthy families hired a pedagogue – an educated slave responsible to train the children in every area of life, from the time they got up, to the time they went to bed. If he had done a good job, the child was mature and responsible; if he failed, the child was a rebellious, ignorant slight on the family – but either way his job was finished when the child was considered an adult. Paul says this describes the law. It serves a particular function for a limited time. It teaches the rudiments of knowledge and morality and it is something which the child is destined to outgrow.

You may be asking, *‘Where does this grace message fit in to all the rules and expectations of child-rearing? How can you believe in grace and punish your child?’* It makes sense when you understand that the law is for children. To be trained by the law, they must be punished when they transgress it. We teach them that they live in a cause and effect world and that, regardless of how God feels about them, there are consequences to their actions. There are moral absolutes that undergird society and children need to know that.

However the time comes when laying down the law has either done its job or it hasn’t and the children move on. The law must go as children mature and grace, faith, unconditional love and acceptance must take over in a practical sense in the outworking of their lives. God gave the responsibility to parents to raise their children and there are many rules involved in that task. If the parents don’t parent well it’s not the Church’s responsibility to finish their job. The Church is not there to pile on legalistic rules and regulations, yet many people have that idea. Paul says it clearly: *“Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”*

The Church of Jesus Christ relates to adults and therefore treats people as though they have been raised properly. Do people still need teaching? Absolutely!

There will be those in our midst who didn't learn basic morality, how to be a good citizen, or a good husband or wife. So we continue teaching, not by making rules for people to follow, but rather how God says to teach adults - by walking in the Spirit; because if we walk in the Spirit we will automatically fulfil the requirements of the law. It happens because the love of Christ in our heart flows out into others' lives as we treat them with respect.

Everyone who is in Christ has the promise of His indwelling Spirit. The Holy Spirit will show you the deep things of God in His Word and your life will be transformed as you walk with Him, trust Him and yield to Him. He is your teacher now, not the law. He is your counsellor and companion.

John 16:13-15 *"...When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you."*

If we agree that the purpose of the law was to lead us to Christ, it follows that any efforts in keeping the law are a backward step. What sets Christianity apart from religion is God's unconditional favour towards us, in saving us and empowering us to live in a way that's pleasing to Him. All of the world's religions are an attempt to get right with God, to establish a relationship with Him through our own efforts and performance. Every religion has a code of ethics which they claim has, in essence, been handed down by God, or evolved and been refined by the community. In essence, that code says: *God likes you more or less, depending on how well you perform in relation to those ethical standards; so to advance in any religion you need to learn what's expected and then work hard to meet the criteria.* All of those religious systems are what the Bible refers to as Old Covenant - by nature at least. The Old Covenant basically says that God gives us something to do, and if we do it well He blesses us, and if we don't, He punishes us or withholds His blessing. It is conditional. This is described well in Deuteronomy chapter 28.

Deuteronomy 28:1-12 *"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands given you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock - the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.*

The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you. The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways.

Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity - in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground - in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you. The LORD will open the heavens .."

The list continues of all the good things that result from doing the right thing. If you fail according to Old Testament law, this is what will happen to you:

Deuteronomy 28:15-20 *“However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke ...”*

In the Old Covenant we are blessed or cursed depending on our performance. This law came from a holy, righteous, perfect God, so what could possibly be wrong with God's law - His Covenant, old or otherwise? Let me stress that there is nothing wrong with the law of God. What's wrong is us! A conditional covenant will not work for sinful people in a fallen world. We simply cannot keep our end of it. The New Covenant in Christ is God's solution to OUR weakness and inadequacy.

The genius and effectiveness of the New Covenant is in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the performance of Jesus Christ as a man on earth, the law of God was kept perfectly for the very first time by a human being. Now, as far as every believer is concerned, that old covenant law has been taken away and nailed to the cross (Colossian 2). You don't need to struggle and strain trying to keep the New Covenant. It has already been kept for you by Jesus. No matter how badly you mess up today, you cannot break the New Covenant - it's too late for that. It is kept by Jesus Christ in heaven at the right hand of God the Father - perfectly, completely and eternally. The book of Hebrews is particularly helpful in our understanding of the old and new covenants.

Hebrews 8:7-13 *“For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.*

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear.”

The writer continues in the next chapter:

Hebrews 9:11-15 *“When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. (This covenant is eternal - it's a closed deal - it's fulfilled completely for you). The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a New Covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance - now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.”*

Jesus died for those sins committed under the first covenant and so, because of what Jesus did for you, your sins are remembered no more! Not just your past sins or your present sins, but the sins you're going to commit in the future!

There is now no condemnation whatsoever for those who are in Christ Jesus! Any condemnation or fear of punishment you may feel is coming from your own tortured conscience, or from the devil - it has no basis in reality if you are in Christ. You have been set free from the penalty of sin and when that truth really sinks in, you will be set free from the power of sin.

You are forgiven – totally, completely and permanently – from all sin. Under the old order we were all born spiritually dead and under the control of the law. We were judged on the basis of our performance. If we did well we were rewarded, if we didn't we were punished - and we didn't perform well! We were born into a moral universe, governed by moral and spiritual laws and we were all judged in light of those laws. Laws are good for some things, but not for mediating a relationship with God.

Understanding grace in all its truth is only possible when we understand the new covenant and it's stark difference to the old covenant. In our next sermon we will explore this even further as we examine one of the most powerful illustrations of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. So watch this space and keep asking God to give you a full revelation of the radical freedom which is yours in Christ and which so many of your friends, family and neighbours are yet to discover!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

Either Jesus is your everything – your justification, your sanctification, your abundant life irrespective of your performance, or He's nothing! It's law or it's grace, but it can never be a little bit of both.

Everyone who is in Christ has the promise of His indwelling Spirit. The Holy Spirit will show you the deep things of God in His Word and your life will be transformed as you walk with Him, trust Him and yield to Him. He is your teacher now, not the law. He is your counsellor and companion.

The thing that sets Christianity apart from all religions is God's unconditional favour towards us, in saving us and empowering us to live in a way that's pleasing to Him.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus – none whatsoever! Any condemnation or fear of punishment is coming from your own tortured conscience, or from the devil, but it has no basis in reality if you are in Christ. You have been set free from the penalty of sin and when that truth really sinks in, you will be set free from the power of sin.