

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 3

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[00:00:00] Let us pray.

I am conscious that time is at a premium.

I am also conscious that in a Bible Basics conference that what the Bible says is far more important than what any of us say about it. So I feel compelled to read a paragraph before I begin. Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 1 and verse 1.

Paul, an apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia. [00:01:02] Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world according to the will of God and our Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel, which is not another.

But there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. [00:02:04] As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

Lesson three, the distinction between law and grace. Before we make any direct comparison, first of all we look at the principle under which each system operates, or as we've heard, under which each dispensation operates. When the law of Moses was given to Moses, it becomes [00:03:08] very clear, as we read Exodus chapter 20, that again and again the people were told there were things they must do, thou shalt, and there were things they must not do, thou shalt not. And when we've read the detail, we cannot come to any other conclusion that under the law of Moses, blessing was available, offered as a reward in return for an adequate performance, adequate in God's sight, not in the sight of man. And it can be summed up by the phrase, this do, and thou shalt live. As we take account of

that, let us remember that the promise of life under the law was no more, and could be no more, than continuity [00:04:09] of life upon earth. Eternal, spiritual, heavenly matters are not relative to the law, and we'll come to that. But under the law, blessing was available, the opportunity to meet a certain declared standard in order that life on earth could be continued. A very significant portion of scripture, like many others, there won't be time to look at them, look again at Deuteronomy chapter 27 and 28. A graphic occasion, two mountains, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Now, [00:05:05] it's easy to remember. Ebal ends with an L, so think of law. Gerizim begins with G, so think of grace. We are getting a contrast between law and grace. And Moses, on God's instruction, said, now look, get six men, representing six of the tribes, to stand on the top of Mount Ebal, and let them shout out, the law, the law, the law. And get others, I'm speaking metaphorically, of course, others had to stand on Mount Gerizim. They didn't have to shout grace. The ones that were directing the attention to the results of the law, they [00:06:04] had to say, blessing, blessing, blessing, or curse, curse, curse. And on Ebal, because it was referring to the law, they had to shout curse, a curse. And those on the top of Mount Gerizim had to shout a blessing. Well, I'm happy not to need to repeat what has been said before. But under the law, we have to learn that God set apart a special nation for himself. And when you read Isaiah 5, and the latter part of Matthew 21, which quotes freely from Isaiah 5, you find that what is said there is that God separated one nation.

[00:07:03] He gave them every possible advantage and every possible favour. And they were, as we might say, creme de la creme among the nations. Now, the first thing that became obvious, as we've learned relative to every dispensation, that once God in his goodness commits things to man, in man's responsibility, man makes a mess of what God has entrusted to him. And so it was under the law. They soon made it plain that if things were to be left to them in responsibility as they were, there would be no blessing, blessing, blessing. All the way it would be curse, curse, curse. God's answer to their falling foul of the law.

[00:08:07] And when you read Deuteronomy 28, when you get the effect of the law and the result of the law, it's no longer half and half, curse and blessing, as it seemed to be at the beginning. You find that the result of the law can only be curse, curse, curse. Now, curse is not a very nice word, and we'll come back to that again. But early on, it became clear that if Israel as a nation were ever to come into the blessing of God, it could only be by God's sovereign favor, sovereignly dispensing blessing to them, not because of what they were or what they did, but because it was in his heart to bless them. So even then, and we get an [00:09:05] illustration of this in Jeremiah 30 and 31, we find that eventually, when blessing does come to Israel, instead of being on the basis, thou shalt or thou shalt not, but in Jeremiah 30 and 31, again and again, score them through, underline them, highlight them, whatever you will, and you will find that again and again, when blessing comes, it is because God says, I will, I will, I will. Grace is different. And one very, very special section, Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9. We learn there, by grace, the sovereign favor of God, because of his [00:10:02] disposition to bless, that blessing, wherever it occurs, will be on the principle of grace.

And the verse is clear, as we see here. Blessing flows when an individual soul accepts before God that blessing could never arise because of any response on their side to what God has promised. It can only be because of the sovereign favor of God. And God is in a position to bless. God is in a position to show grace, because Christ has died and risen again. We cannot emphasize that too strongly, that blessing in the Bible is seen to arise because Christ [00:11:02] has died and risen again. He blesses on the basis of the value to him of the work of Christ upon the cross. Now, we've had a little look at law, a little look at grace, now we come to where they come together, if at all. Now, it has to be said, most emphatically, that the idea of a mixture of grace and law is not to be found anywhere

in the Bible, totally without support. You and I can be thankful to God that we were caused to be born in a land, in a day, when blessing is available, not on the grounds of anything that we have done or ever could do, but on the basis of what Christ has done. Before we leave that [00:12:03] word grace, it's not a bad thing to think of what we call an acrostic, where we take the word and we put a word to each letter of the fundamental word. I haven't heard of a better acrostic for grace than to say G-R-A-C-E, God's riches at Christ's expense. Or, work was necessary before blessing can be made available by grace, but not any work that you and I could do. The only work acceptable to God is the work of Christ upon the cross, as far as fundamental salvation is concerned. We then live in the day of grace, whether you call it a dispensation or any other word. We live in the day of grace. As we shall see [00:13:08] from Galatians, the two principles are mutually contradictory. Can it live together? Completely incompatible, totally and mutually exclusive. Now, there are many sayings we have which we don't know where we heard them first, but we've heard them. We will never at this stage track down the first time they were said. Now, one of them summarises a distinction between law and grace like this. Run, John, run, the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. Grace speaks of better things. It bids him fly and gives him wings. Now, when you hear things like that, chew over it, think about it, take it apart, put it [00:14:03] together and come to something that satisfies you. It's not that you disagree with what said, but you find words or phrases of your own. Now, the version that appeals to me, that seems to me to be right, puts it slightly different. Do this or that, the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. Grace brings me to much better things. It bids me fly and gives me wings. In other words, grace gives me the capacity to do what God wants me to do, but it's not because I have any ability or capacity in myself. It's because it's been endowed upon me by God himself. Now, in a conference like this, we take away [00:15:02] far more than what there's time to say on the day. So, one of the virtues is to make notes of something to look at when we get home, and we'll all need to do that. Now, if we haven't noticed before, this is a major matter relative to grace. The epistle to the Romans isn't the preaching of the gospel to the sinner, it's the teaching of the gospel to the saint, the Christian believer. And we say, oh, yes, but Galatians speaks about grace as well, and the gospel. The distinction is this. Romans is a foundational epistle, a straightforward exposition of the principles of grace to the saved sinner, the basis on which salvation is bestowed. It's one of the few New Testament epistles which isn't corrective. [00:16:08] It's purely expository. The epistle to the Galatians, on the other hand, is not so much the exposition of grace to the saved sinner, but it's the vindication. It's defending it against attack, and it tells us things that we need to bear in mind. Now, we've read the first nine verses. It's possible that the epistle to the Galatians is the least understood of the New Testament epistles. And it needs to be understood if we are to distinguish between law and grace. We can certainly be thankful that it was included in the canon [00:17:04] of scripture early on, and it's been preserved to us for 2,000 years. It was never more applicable, never more necessary than it is at the present time. Without being critical at all, I'm fairly sure that there are very many wholly living, totally devoted Christian believers alive in the world today who cannot or do not distinguish between law and grace, and this is one reason for its inclusion in today's agenda. At Galatia, there was a big problem. Into the second half of the first century AD, teachers had arrived from Jerusalem into the Galatian assemblies [00:18:05] in what we would call Turkey now, and it was so important, the matter that arose, that Paul wrote this special epistle in order to make the matter plain. And because of that, he was extremely careful, and the Holy Spirit was extremely careful, in showing him to show us the importance of the teaching that was being made. And much of the teaching, like much of scripture, depends upon the actual words that Paul was led to use. Another thing about the words that Paul uses here, without any knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, Latin or whatever, [00:19:01] and I'm one of those happy people that cannot confuse you because I know nothing of these languages. But I can see, and I can read, and I can appreciate the comments of those that I've learned to trust, that the strength of the language that Paul uses is

stronger. He is more vehement in the language that he uses in the epistle to the Galatians than he is in any other language. Now, when we see what the problem was, we can understand why he was so vehement on the matter. The error was this. The so-called teachers were saying the cross of Christ is vital, and you must believe that Jesus died for your sins and that he was raised from among the dead and he's gone back to heaven. If they'd said [00:20:04] full stop, amen to all that. But they didn't stop there. They went on and said, but Christ has done his bit, but now that you're saved, you've got to do your bit if you're going to be absolutely sure that your salvation is secure and eternal. Now, of course, it's true that, if you're going to criticise me, by the way, criticise me for what I say, not for what I don't say. It is right to say that once you're saved, how you live is very important and we're going to have two sessions at least on that. But as far as eternal security is concerned, as far as the salvation of sins is concerned, as far as being right for heaven [00:21:06] is concerned, it is totally obnoxious, totally abhorrent to God to suggest that you and I could do anything or must do something just to make that salvation complete. The question is that we have to ask ourselves, is Christ as a person and the work of Christ sufficient for our salvation? And, of course, it is. There can never be any other suggestion that there's something we can do which is needed to round off or to complete the value to God of the work of Christ on the cross by anything that you and I have to do. Now, that's why I read the opening paragraph of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians. The very words that [00:22:08] he uses are important. That verse in 1 Corinthians 12, is it, is very important. Chapter 2. The words the Holy Spirit uses. Once we can track down what the word was that the Bible uses and the way it's used in that particular case, if we've got an acceptably reliable translation in front of us, it becomes clear what the scripture means. Now, Paul says, what I've got to offer you, I suppose he was comparing himself with these teachers that came from Galatia, from Jerusalem to Galatia. He said, this, what I've given you, didn't originate from man and it didn't come through man as an agent. What he got, he got from God himself [00:23:08] and through the Lord Jesus Christ, the instrumental agent of God. And Paul's links with him were as one who was raised from among the dead when he met him on the road to Damascus. Now, after that introduction, he sums up Christianity. He says, relative to the past, he gave himself for our sins. As to the present, he delivers us from this present evil world as to the future glory throughout the ages of ages in eternity lies ahead. Now, this was particularly applicable to the Galatians because they were tending to feel they should be linked [00:24:03] with the people of the present age and they had to learn that lesson. And we had a little comment before and it will come again that there's a limit on our associations with the world in its many forms. And to clinch what he says, he has to say, now, if you want to measure of God's view of the world, look at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The terminal end of all that man does and all that man can do, unsaved man, is demonstrated in that Christ had to suffer upon the cross in order that we might be blessed. There are certain significant words in the epistle to the Galatians. We've had one or two, the curse, crucifixion, [00:25:08] and others. And when the word crucified is used in scripture, it all means, it always means a summary end to what has gone on before in a way that is sudden and a way that is the result of the judgment of God. That's its use in scripture. And we've seen it in Daniel 9 over the years, Daniel 9 26, relative to our life on earth as unsaved sinners, that came to an end when Christ was crucified. Historically, he was cut off in the midst of his days. We learn in Colossians that we were cut off in the cutting off of the [00:26:06] Christ. Paul says there that when Christ died, and it's a terrible thought, if I was the only sinner that had ever lived, Christ would have found it necessary to die the cruel, shameful death of the cross because of the offence to God by my sins. And when we think that the work of Christ before God was sufficient to cover the sins potentially of every sinner that has ever lived, we get a value of the immense worth of the work of Christ upon the cross. Now, there's nothing new under the sun. Scripture says so. In this last generation or so, [00:27:05] we've begun and continue to hear a lot about pollution, about corruption, about adulteration, that it affects our physical health, our medical condition, if we introduce things into the body that shouldn't be there. And it's a

good, necessary lesson to learn. But the epistle to the Galatians was preaching this 2,000 years ago. It says the pure, unmixed, unadulterated, uncorrupted gospel of Christ on the basis of grace cannot be mixed with anything else or it will be polluted. And [00:28:02] this is why he got so worked up in speaking to the Galatians. He said, how dare you suggest that anything other than the work of Christ upon the cross can be the basis of any blessing in any dispensation. In the end, you will find that God is sovereign and he blesses and he chooses to bless. Yes, David, I've seen you out of the corner of my eye. Another piece of homework. There are two words and they're on the board. We can see it in English anyway. You can see something of what it means. You have a word beginning with A-double-L or alas or something like that. We know the word alliterative, things that sound the same, the use of words that sound the same. We know heteros, heterodox, heterosexual, something which is opposite or different. Now, Paul comes to the [00:29:09] climax early on in his epistle and he says, I preach the gospel, the pure, unadulterated gospel of the grace of God through Christ and you believe it. But now you're introducing something which is totally different, totally opposed and he said it's totally obnoxious to God. Now, there are examples here listed which you would well do to consider. There are things that are another of the same kind, the same character and they come under that umbrella [00:30:06] of alas or similar words. But there are other groups of things which are, we are told in scripture, are totally different in character, must never be classified with the first group. And this idea that you and I could ever do something which was worthy of blessing as the basis of salvation, he says, is totally abhorrent and it's impure, it's an adulteration and you're mixing things which don't mix and so he comes to that. He says you perverted the gospel of God.

And he says, if you introduce something which is other than the work of Christ for the basis of [00:31:09] salvation, he says, you will merit the curse of God. It's the only end to that which is of natural unsaved man. And as we read from Deuteronomy or referred to in Deuteronomy 28, we find that which was declared as the curse of those who were demonstrably unable to keep the law, that curse would come upon you and I if we attempt to put ourselves on the basis of regulations. How do we live then? As we close.

Every now and again we get a summary and especially in that teaching epistle, the epistle to the [00:32:03] Romans, we find that we get a summary. Romans 10.4 says Christ is the end of the law as a basis of righteousness to everyone that believeth. And as far as we are concerned, the law's finished, it's come to an end, superseded by Christ. And then as stated, the teaching of grace is given in the first four verses of Romans chapter 8. Verse 1, a summary of chapter 5. Verse 2, a summary of chapter 6. Verse 3, a summary of 7. And verse 4, an introduction and summary of chapter 8. We can be sure the law did its job.

It demonstrated man's incapability of pleasing God and it came in the teaching epistle of Romans [00:33:08] it comes to a conclusion in the middle of Romans 3, the whole world is guilty before God. Only once ever in the history of the world has God been completely satisfied with a life lived by a man on earth and that was in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is essential that we live godly in this present world and that is the title of talks which are yet to come. But for the moment, I must pass over to Nick.