

Galatians 3:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law.

Analysis

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. Paul anticipates another objection: 'Is the law then against the promises of God?' (ho oun nomos kata tōn epangeliōn tou theou, ὁ οὖν νόμος κατὰ τῶν ἐπαγγελιῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ)—if the Law can't justify and is inferior to the promise, does this pit Law against promise? Paul's emphatic answer: 'God forbid' (mē genoito, μὴ γένοιτο)—'May it never be!' The strongest negation in Greek. The Law and promise serve different purposes; they're not contradictory but complementary.

The conditional statement: 'for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law' (ei gar edothē nomos ho dynamenos zōopoiēsai, ontōs ek nomou an ēn hē dikaiosynē, εἰ γὰρ ἐδόθη νόμος ὁ δυνάμενος ζωοποιῆσαι, ὅντως ἐκ νόμου ἀνὴν ἡ δικαιοσύνη). The participle 'could have given life' (dynamenos zōopoiēsai, δυνάμενος ζωοποιῆσαι)—'able to make alive'—reveals the issue: the Law lacks life-giving power. The adverb 'verily' (ontōs, ὅντως)—'truly, really'—stresses that *if* the Law could give life, righteousness would indeed come from Law.

But the contrary-to-fact conditional proves the Law cannot give life. Romans 8:3 states why: 'what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son...' The Law is holy and good (Romans 7:12), but powerless to

impart life because of human sinfulness. The Law reveals sin, condemns sin, but cannot save from sin. Only the promise, fulfilled in Christ, gives life. Therefore, Law and promise work in concert: Law exposes our need; promise meets our need.

Historical Context

Jewish theology revered the Torah as the source of life (Deuteronomy 30:19-20, 32:46-47; Psalm 119:93; Proverbs 4:4), but misunderstood this to mean Torah-obedience produced life/righteousness. Paul agrees the Torah *promised* life (Leviticus 18:5, Galatians 3:12), but insists no one achieved it because no one kept the whole Law. The Torah cannot 'give life' (*zōopoiēsai*)—impart spiritual life and righteousness—because of human sinfulness. Only the Spirit, received through the promise by faith (v. 14), gives life (John 6:63, 2 Corinthians 3:6).

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does verse 21 clarify that the Law and the promise are not contradictory but serve different (complementary) purposes in God's plan?
2. Why is the Law unable to 'give life' (*zōopoiēsai*) and produce righteousness, despite being holy and good?
3. In what ways might you be expecting the Law (moral effort, religious duty) to give you life and righteousness, rather than looking to the life-giving promise of the Spirit through faith?

Interlinear Text

ἡ οὖν νόμου κατὰ ἡ ἐπαγγελιῶν ἡ θεοῦ
which then Is the law against which the promises which of God
G3588 G3767 G3551 G2596 G3588 G1860 G3588 G2316

μὴ γένοιτο εἰ γὰρ ἐδόθη νόμου ἡ δυνάμενος
God forbid if for given Is the law which could
G3361 G1096 G1487 G1063 G1325 G3551 G3588 G1410

ζωοποιῆσαι ὄντως ἀν ἐκ νόμου ἦν ἡ
have given life verily should by Is the law have been which
G2227 G3689 G302 G1537 G3551 G2258 G3588

δικαιοσύνη·
righteousness
G1343

Additional Cross-References

Galatians 2:21 (Righteousness): I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.

Romans 9:31 (Righteousness): But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness.

Galatians 2:19 (Word): For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God.

Romans 3:31 (Word): Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

Galatians 2:17 (Righteousness): But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.

Romans 3:4 (Righteousness): God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.

Romans 3:6 (References God): God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?

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