

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 ἂν ἦν 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	G1096	if	for	given	Is the law	which	could
G3361		G1487	G1063	G1325	G3551	G3588	G1410
ζωοποιῆσαι	ὄντως	ἂν	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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