

Ask the Rabbi

Submitted Question #5:

The New King James translation of Galatians 3:23-25 states:¹

"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Messiah, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

It seems to be saying that the Law of Moses was only temporary, and that we need not obey it today. I was taught that the Law is still valid. Is the Mosaic Law still in effect or is it not?

The Rabbi's Response:

There are two related Scriptures that I need to mention as part of my answer to your question; they are:

John 1:17: *"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus the Messiah."* (NKJ)

Romans 6:14: *"For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace."* (NKJ)

Neither Galatians 3:23-25 nor either of these two Scriptures means that law has been done away with and that there was no grace for man until Yeshua came. Grace is one of God's attributes, and His grace toward man has been manifest since man's fall from the Garden of Eden. It was God's grace that He did not kill Adam and Eve on the spot, and start humankind all over again when Adam sinned by eating from the forbidden tree. You notice that I said man's "fall from the Garden" and not "fall from grace," which is a common expression improperly derived from Galatians 5:4 (NKJ):

"You have become estranged from Messiah, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

It is a mistake to try to understand a verse of Scripture taken out of context. The context in this case includes verses 2 and 3 as follows:

"Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Messiah will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Messiah, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:2-4 NKJ)

¹ Consistent with common Messianic Jewish practice, "Messiah" is substituted for "Christ" wherever it appears in English translations of the New Covenant Scriptures.

So, contrary to saying that man has fallen from grace, Galatians 5:2-4 establishes that man has not fallen from grace, and that he should therefore not do so by attempting to be justified by the law.

Now with that background, let's get back to your question about the meaning of Galatians 3:23-25. In "The Complete Jewish Bible," David H. Stern translates Galatians 3:16-26 as follows:

"Now the promises were made to Avraham and to his seed. It doesn't say, "and to seeds," as if to many; on the contrary, it speaks of one- "and to your seed"- and this "one" is the Messiah. Here is what I am saying: the legal part of the Torah, which came into being 430 years later, does not nullify an oath sworn by God, so as to abolish the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the legal part of the Torah, it no longer comes from a promise. But God gave it to Avraham through a promise. So then, why the legal part of the Torah? It was added in order to create transgressions, until the coming of the seed about whom the promise had been made. Moreover, it was handed down through angels and a mediator. Now a mediator implies more than one, but God is one. Does this mean that the legal part of the Torah stands in opposition to God's promises? Heaven forbid! For if the legal part of the Torah which God gave had had in itself the power to give life, then righteousness really would have come by legalistically following such a Torah. But instead, the Tanakh shuts up everything under sin; so that what had been promised might be given, on the basis of Yeshua the Messiah's trusting faithfulness, to those who continue to be trustingly faithful. Now before the time for this trusting faithfulness came, we were imprisoned in subjection to the system which results from perverting the Torah into legalism, kept under guard until this yet-to-come trusting faithfulness would be revealed. Accordingly, the Torah functioned as a custodian until the Messiah came, so that we might be declared righteous on the ground of trusting and being faithful. But now that the time for this trusting faithfulness has come, we are no longer under a custodian. For in union with the Messiah, you are all children of God through this trusting faithfulness;"

You may notice some words here that you do not recognize, but I will mention one of them which is the Hebrew word "*Torah*." This word means God's "law" but, more generally, it also means God's teaching. You notice that Stern makes a distinction between "law" and "legalism," whereas "law" is God's will for us and is good, but "legalism" is a misappropriation of law and is bad.

My way of explaining Galatians 3:23-25 is similar. God is talking to the seed of Abraham to whom the promises were made; these are the Israelites of old, who we call the Jews today. Messiah is the seed of the Jewish people because He was born of a Jewish mother and was therefore Himself a Jew (The book of Galatians is written to a community of Jewish believers who lived in Galatia). The Scripture is saying that the Covenant made with Abraham came before the Law that was given through Moses, and cannot be annulled by it. The promise of inheritance was the promise that there would come a Messiah who would save; there was never a promise of law. However, God saw a need to give the Israelites laws to govern them because they were transgressing God's will. The laws that God gave did not nullify his original promises and did not impart life, but rather sustained the Israelites until those who would believe could be

brought to Messiah at a later time, and in a later covenant. That is the meaning of Galatians 3:22-24:

"But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus the Messiah might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Messiah, that we might be justified by faith." (NKJ)

However, remember that in his letter to the Galatians, Paul was speaking to believers in Yeshua, so he said in verses 25 and 26:

"But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Messiah Jesus." (NKJ)

He was telling the Galatians that the law had done its job in sustaining them until the time that they would achieve life through faith in Yeshua, so they now no longer needed to look toward the law as their instruction for that purpose. He was not telling them that the law had no further value for them in revealing God's will for their lives; if he had meant that, he would not have written 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

I hope this answers your question.