

# Man's Responsibility and God's Promises

by John Nelson Darby

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*The sermon highlights the contrast between the law and promise, emphasizing that the law cannot save us and only reveals our sin, while promise is based on God's faithfulness and His love for us.*

**Scripture:** Galatians 3:10

**Topics:** "Grace vs. Law", "Faith and Redemption"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the distinction between man's responsibility under the law and God's promises of grace, illustrating that the law reveals human sinfulness and the curse that follows, while the promise of salvation through faith in Christ offers hope and redemption. He explains that the law was given to highlight the hopelessness of man's condition, leading to despair, but God's promise, made before the law, assures believers of their inheritance as children of God. Darby encourages the faithful to rely on God's grace rather than their own efforts, affirming that true faith rests in the completed work of Christ, who bore the curse and fulfilled the law on behalf of humanity.

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## Transcript

MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY AND GOD'S PROMISES

GALATIANS 3

THERE are two great points in this chapter: -

First, the effect of the law, when any one is under it

Second, the contrast between law and promise, and whether it be by law, or by promise, that the blessing of the inheritance is ours.

In the early part of the chapter (I do not speak now of the first two or three verses), we are told that the effect of being under the law is to be " under the curse " ; in the latter part, we find the blessings of the inheritance ours, not by law, but by promise: " If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Thus are the counsels of God brought out, and that in a manner that applies itself to the constant tendency of the human heart and its actings, which ever go to exalt man, and to debase God.

It is singular the way in which the human heart is continually reasoning within itself, as if there was no distinct revelation from God of His mind-searching and inquiring in order that it may conclude something about itself and God. Now it is quite true that the power of grace must work, in order that this revelation should be understood, but it is not merely in the unconverted man there is this reasoning. Alas! he often reasons not at all about it, but goes on in his own way, careless, reckless, and unconcerned. In the heart of the saints there is constant reasoning with regard to their standing before God. And, in all such cases, it is quite plain that faith is not in exercise. Whenever I begin to reason on the state of my own soul, faith is not in exercise. I do not say that the person is not a believer, but I say, faith is not in exercise. This is quite evident. Faith receives the testimony of God, and does not reason about it. There the difficulty lies. It is not that revelation is not plain, but that the heart of man is not subdued.

It is not a proof that faith is in exercise when I do not judge myself, because, when I judge myself, I judge myself before the Lord, in order to have removed whatever may be found within me that is wrong in His sight. Grace enables me to do this. But whenever there is any reasoning from myself as to my condition, faith is not in exercise. It is true this reasoning may follow upon belief in testimony (be, in that sense, a consequence of faith), but it is not faith. That is, I may believe there is a judgment to come, and that Christ can be my only Saviour (seeing there is not salvation in another, for " there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved "), and I may set about reasoning as to what will be my portion, whether I can say that Christ is my Saviour; but that is not, in itself, any right exercise of faith.

We shall find the testimony of the word of God to be most simple. Yet, wherever the natural conscience is awakened, there is a certain sense of responsibility to God (indeed that is, in a sense, the awakening of it)-the knowledge that God takes notice of all that is going on, of what we do, and the like, and that there is a judgment to come. Therefore the moment a man's conscience is so awakened (the grace of God not being known), he begins to inquire whether his conduct is such as God can approve and accept ; and thence he draws some inference as to his own future happiness or misery. This is the natural state of man-of every man that thinks about the matter. But it is, alas! the real condition too of multitudes of believers in Christ, and of those even who have once known redemption largely. There is a constant tendency in the heart to turn again to self-to a condition in which man stands responsible to God. It is always the case when the soul has got out of the power of the testimony of the Spirit of God as to the completeness of redemption; as also when we have not come to a distinct knowledge of the hopelessness of our condition before God as men. I say to a distinct knowledge ; that is, when the soul has not estimated truthfully the hopelessness of its case, that in the flesh good does not dwell and become fully satisfied that everything-all the practical righteousness, holiness, or graciousness of the saint-is consequent upon the introduction of that new thing created in us by the power of God because of the risen Jesus.

We get in these Galatians an example of this, where the soul, after having had the knowledge of grace in Jesus Christ " evidently set forth crucified among them," went back. They had " begun in the Spirit," and they now thought " in the flesh " to add to what Christ had done. That is, that they could, by that which is in man, and of man-the old man too-add to that which is of the new man, Christ. And that, I repeat, beloved, is the constant tendency of the heart. Wherever there is not the distinct knowledge of the hopelessness of man's condition before God, we go back to get from man something which may be added to what God has given us in the Lord Jesus Christ. John says, " This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." Now if we do not know that the flesh cannot in any way come in and take a share or part in it, we are constantly adding and connecting something of the flesh.

God began by giving " promise." And here there was nothing at all of man. But, because (as we shall see more especially in the latter part of the chapter, where the apostle speaks about promise from God-promise coming from Him when there was nothing in man to call it out, except, indeed, the ruin and need of man), when He had given the promise, before He had completed that which He had promised redemption, before the revelation of Christ, He knew the constant tendency of the human heart to seek to satisfy its own feeling of responsibility, God gave the full extent of His demand upon it, with the consequence of failure. Because, I say, He knew what was in the heart of man, its tendency from the first-natural tendency (that is, until redemption and grace are fully known) to judge about itself by itself as to its future state ; and also the pride of man, which supposes something in man which can be brought to God, or something from man which can be done for God-before He did anything for the accomplishment of His promise, He brought in the law, thus trying man in responsibility to the utmost.

It is quite right, most assuredly, to be what God has required in His revealed will. God has required and demanded a certain amount of good in me, and I have the plain revelation of God about it. Therefore I cannot act as if there were no revelation. It is one of the sins of the heart of man, that of " intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind," thinking he can approach God by some means of his own devising. God requires something that is not merely the work of man's hands, something real in the soul, something which has to do with man's relationship to Himself, and to his fellow-creature. There is this in the law-the direct requirement of God from man, of what man ought to be towards God and before Him. That is one way to take up the law. And, further, there is the prohibition of what sin had brought in.

There are these two things : first, what God requires positively of man, expressed in the summary given by our Lord - Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself " ; and then, as the other part, the prohibition of what man was indulging in. The law presented the requirements of God, that is, supposing man was right practically before God; and took cognizance of what man was not, and prohibited it. And that is all the law did ; except, indeed, to pronounce the curse, if there was failure in the things required.

Now as soon as this is tried-the moment we get here, and see the law in this light-we find man at once brought in completely hopeless and helpless. And for this very reason, that he has done the things God forbids. He is " ungodly," but not only so; he is, moreover, " without strength." This is his condition naturally ; and the moment there is real desire, and the endeavour, to serve God according to the law, it is found out. Supposing he desires (which I assume and grace produces it) to serve God, and not to do anything forbidden in the law, he discovers the very principle of his nature to be all wrong. There is a law in his members, warring against the law of his mind, and bringing him into captivity to the law of sin, which is in his members, which has selfishness for its basis, and corruption for its object. It is in himself. Hence the reason that we so often find persons crying out, " O wretched man that I am! " Moreover, when he comes to see what is in himself, it is that which brings him down into despair. It is not his past sins-he could easily suppose God might forgive them, nay, perhaps, that they are forgiven, put away, when he was first converted. The trial is not there. But when he feels the principle of those sins to be in himself-the principle that produced them there still and working in him, now that he lives and " delights in the law of God after the inner man "-it is this which casts him down. And cast down he remains until he apprehends the ministry of grace.

Now, beloved friends, you see God has given law for the prohibition of evil. And, taking it in that point of view, He gave it to man already in sin. It came in after two things, evil and the promise. It was a thing " added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise was made " (v. 19), neither the original condition of man, nor the purpose of God about man. It " came in," it is said (though its elements, no doubt, are everlasting and eternal truth), " by the bye," added because of transgressions. " The law entered, that the offence might abound," Rom. 5 : 20. Hence we are taught, that its object was to make plain and evident-to discover that perverseness of the will of man, which would never otherwise have been discovered-the inclination, where there is the knowledge of good, and the desire after good, to do evil ; and, therefore, the hopelessness of man's case before God. Man is concluded under sin (V. 22). That is the effect of the law. It was quite clear that man delighted in sin. Natural conscience sufficed to shew there was sin and guilt. But then the law came in and was added to these, " that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God," Rom. 3 : 19.

What is said here ? " As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse," v. 10. Mark the force of that expression. It is not, as many as are living in sin, neither yet, merely, as many as as have broken the law (though that is the reason of it) ; but " as many as are of the works of the law." How universal the statement! It is quite true that man is under " the curse of the law," because he has been the breaker of the law; but it is all who are of the works of the law who are under that curse. The law was not given to prohibit lust, until man was a wilful creature-a being in whom lust was found-until after sin had entered. I am not now speaking of the law respecting Adam's not eating the fruit, but of the law given by Moses (v. 19). Coming in at that time, it pronounced the curse upon every one " that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them." It took this ground.

And even the very notice in the scripture before us is remarkable. The apostle says, " for it is written " (v. 10), that is quoting Deuteronomy, where we find (chap. 27) that six tribes were to stand upon mount Gerizin, to bless the people ; and six upon mount Ebal, to curse. But where the details are entered into, there are no tribes mentioned for blessing-the blessing is not heard at all ; it is only the curse.

Again, " the law entered that the offence might abound " (not that sin might abound : God could not do anything that sin might abound), that is, that the sin already in man's nature might become positively and definitely " transgression." The law did not produce sin, but only manifested it. Let us look at what the apostle says in Romans 7, " What shall we say then ? Is the law sin ? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law; for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once ; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained unto life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me?

God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good." Again, we read in another place (I merely quote it now as regards its application to this part of the subject), " The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law," I Cor. 15 : 56. Directly the law bent down on the conscience, it proved man to be altogether wrong. Every thought that man had was detected, and the will refusing to submit, its acts became transgression, so that sin by the commandment became " exceeding sinful." It produced moreover a great deal more lust in the heart than there was before.

We all know this to be the case. There is a familiar illustration of it constantly seen in our own houses. Request your children not to do a certain thing : let it be only not to look into a box (no matter what), and you find that they all long to look into it. So it is with grown-up persons, they will perversely wish for the forbidden thing, and, what is more, though they may be ashamed of it-ashamed of the expression of it before men-the inclination is so great, that, if they could but do it and not be seen, they would not be satisfied until they had. just so with the law.

And now, beloved friends, if that is what the law is, if all who are " of the works of the law are under the curse "-is that the law for me, to have any righteousness through, in the sight of God ? Never; because the law acts on a nature which is already evil, and therefore it can do nothing but lead to the righteous judgment of God against all that is brought out in and from that nature.

What more could God do? (it is not the subject of this chapter, but I would just advert to it)-what more than give right directions, a revelation of what He required from man ? There is another thing that He has done. He sent light into the world. This is something added, as it were, to the requirements of the law. The law cursed, but here (in Christ) was life shewing light to all around, and that man hated, because it proved his deeds to be evil. It was the adaptation of light to every possible state in which man's nature could move. I am not speaking of communicating life; but take man in any condition, and he is without excuse.

Well, beloved, this is the effect of the law as revealed from God. It took up fallen man with the knowledge of good and evil, and did not touch the power he had to meet its requirements, and therefore, necessarily, it brought the curse. The apostle reasons, " If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin," v. 21, 22. Mark that word " all " : it leaves out none. It might be said, If you go and take a man without the ordinances of God, and put him under the law, the effect is known : but there are helps and ordinances ; put a man with them under the law, and he can get life. That was precisely Israel's case. It pleased God, in Israel, to test whether man could get the promises, if under the law with ordinances. It has been proved to the contrary. God says (Exodus 19), " Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." It was not until He had ransomed them out of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness as His " people," that He gave them the law-not until He had brought them unto Himself. Then He says by Moses the mediator, Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed," etc. (v. 5). And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." The law was given on this ground. Then commenced the trial. And what was the consequence? Failure.

" The scripture hath concluded all under sin." And that is what the gospel more fully brought out. The gospel supposes it. Man, no matter what you call him-a heathen, a Jew, or a Christian, with every ordinance you please-is man, and the Lord deals to man the " curse." Man should be what man is not. And therefore that is what the law of God must do, and did. If God gives a law, can He give that law to suit sinners, or Himself ? Is God to come down to give the requirements such as would suit the sinner as a sinner ?-and, if so, what sinner ?-where would you draw the line ?-to a heathen, who is corrupt in all his thoughts ?-to a Jew, who looks merely to outward things ? where can I find a man to whom I might adapt the law, if it is not to be what God requires ? If God gives a law to sinners, He must give the full demand of His holiness. That is what the conscience of man recognises as fitting. There can be no intercourse between God and the sinner on the ground of what God requires, without His either sanctioning or condemning sin. Sanction it He cannot; therefore, and necessarily, all He has to do is to condemn. Law can never go beyond that. No matter what man is called, God deals with man as he really is. And now,

what does the apostle put here in the stead of law ? Promise." There he rests the hope of the soul. " Promise was long before the law. All hangs upon the faithfulness of God. This is the reasoning. A mediator supposed two parties, God and man, and therefore failure, as it depends on the stability of both. Not so promise, as it depended on the stability of God only: "God is one."

If I make you an unconditional promise, a simple promise, to-day, I have no right to say to you on the morrow, Oh you did not do so and so, and therefore the promise is nullified. Certainly not. No! you would reply, you promised me the thing unconditionally, not if I behaved well or ill ; and therefore it is mine. These " promises " were made after sin came in, but before the giving of the law. Sin came in before ever " promise " was heard of. When Adam had failed in the garden, before anything was said to Adam of the foulest sin in his mind, after he had said, " the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat " (he had not only committed sin in disobeying God's command, but he had dared to reproach God) ; before anything was said of that, as soon as the evil was traced up to its source, God, in pronouncing sentence on the serpent as the author of it, gave "promise." But He did not give cc promise " to Adam in sin-to man in that condition (now the law was given to man in that condition), but in the last Adam. Before there was the slightest dealing on the ground of responsibility, "promise" was made in Christ, as the Second Man, the " Seed of the woman." Not a word of it was spoken to Adam personally, yet it was that on which his soul might rest, on which faith could lay hold.

Well, before the Second Man came, before He was revealed, the law was given to shew the effect and consequence of man's being under responsibility. " The law was added [came in by the bye] because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made." " But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman [the seed came], made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."

But there was another step, then, which was this : the promises made to Abraham and his seed (chap. 3 : 17) were confirmed of God in Christ. When Isaac had been offered up (in figure) and raised (in figure), God spake and said, " By myself have I sworn, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee ... and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed , " Gen. 22. Now Isaac was not the true " seed," Christ, the true " seed," was typified by Isaac, in whose offering the promise was confirmed. " He saith not, And to seeds, as of many ; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ," v. 16. The promises are settled on Isaac, after (in figure) he had died and risen again from the dead ; and that is what the grace of God has done for us in Christ. Christ came here and lived, accomplishing in the face of Satan, all that the spiritual man could offer to God in his life. But " except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone : but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Though Christ Himself, as man, might have had the promises, yet He could not have taken up anything with us except through death and resurrection. He could not have had connection with man in the old Adam. Well, He dies, and (having accomplished the work of redemption, done everything, set aside the consequences of responsibility for man, as risen from the dead, in the power of a new and endless life-" the seed " to whom the promises were made) He takes up these promises.

As men, we were under responsibility, and, therefore, under the curse, for we had sinned. Yes, though, through grace, able to say that we are " heirs according to the promise," we had sinned. There was no difference in this respect between ourselves and any poor Jew or Gentile, we were all " by nature children of wrath, even as others," " fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind," Eph. 2 : 3. The state of soul was the same. Perverseness of will was there-the determination to do our own will, and the pleasure of doing it, instead of the will of God.

Christ took all this upon Himself. He charged Himself with responsibility, instead of putting man under it. He underwent, to the full, the last effect of sin, as the result of the wrath of God, and of the power of Satan, as well as of the weakness of man. He bore the curse. He went down into the grave. But He was still the " holy One," and (though He might imputatively take sin) it was not possible that He could be holden of the cords of death. Therefore He rose again head of a new family of men, a new world, a new creation, heir, according to the purposes of God, of all the promises, and heir for ever.

He has accomplished everything-all that was needed for the remission of our sins, and, besides that, broken the power of Satan under which man lay, in the very seat of that power. Through death He has " destroyed him that had the power of death," Heb. 2. Most blessed truth! Christ has put Himself into the condition of man in death, the last stronghold in which Satan held man captive, by the judgment and under the sentence of God Himself. He rose out of it, and became the source of life, and heir for us of all the promises. Grace has found its way into death, and " out of the eater " has brought forth sweetness.

If we look at death, the Prince of life has tasted death ; if, at the power of Satan, Christ has broken and destroyed his power; if, at the wrath of God, He has borne it all, drunk the cup to the very dregs. " All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." " Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves," Psalm 88 : 7.

But, further, He is the righteous inheritor of all the promises as it is said, " All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen," and we, through grace, can add, " to the glory of God by us." How then did we come in ? As heirs together with Him in life-united to Him - one with Him. Our standing before God is in Christ-the Second Man, as having no more part in the flesh, though we have as yet to struggle against it. Death is abolished. Life and incorruptibility are brought to light by the gospel ; and that, because the responsibility question has been settled in the death of Christ.

But it is "by faith." How blessed this!-how true of God!-how blessed for us! By faith we receive all the promises in Christ. By faith we find everything done. It is only to believe. Faith produces all manner of fruit in us, there is wondrous power in it, but still it is only to believe : that is all. just as though you had been deeply in debt, and some kind friend had paid the amount, and, when that was done, had sent you word. The person comes and tells you that your debts are paid, and you believe it. Now your believing produces joy, and gladness, doubtless, in your heart, but, of course, it does not in any measure go to liquidate the debt. So as to salvation, the debt has been paid, Christ has finished the work, and the believing soul enters into all the blessed results (V. 22). Faith is exercised upon that which has been already accomplished. " It is of faith, that it might be by grace, that the promise might be sure to all the seed." Nothing redounds to the glory of the creature. It is a person simply depending upon the truth of God.

When the soul is made hopeless in itself (and this must always be the case when the conscience is really honest under the sense of responsibility), it turns to see what God is. The more the truth of God's requirements is known, the more wretched that soul becomes. The, end of all is seen in that exclamation of the apostle, " O wretched man," etc. I am a man, and therefore a wretched being, one having the curse resting upon me.

God, in the gospel, sees man wicked, miserable, rebellious, lost ; but He sees him according to His infinite compassions. The Lord Jesus has begun altogether a new thing, not demanding what man is required to be before God, but accomplishing what God is towards man-grace. We find in Christ, it is true, and to perfection, what man is required to be before God; but more than that, what God is towards man. Grace

came by Jesus Christ. So that the moment any person, let it be a convicted sinner, stood before Christ as to what he was, he found Christ to be grace. If he came as what he was not, Christ laid him bare ; but, if he came as what he was, then no matter what he as, a poor helpless sinner, a wretched adulteress, or the thief upon the cross (that was not the question-the question was, what was Christ, who came not to judge, but to save), all was grace.

Having found Christ, we have found one who has all the promises of God. And, since He took those promises as a consequence of what He had done in putting away sin, there can be no further question about sin before God. Our sins are necessarily left outside, because Christ Himself has borne them all; as it is said, "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." He stood in our place, and took upon Himself our iniquity, and bore the judgment due to us-went down into the grave, but rose again from the dead in the power of a new and endless life, and ascended up on high, even unto the Father's presence, as our representative. There He stands-we stand there in Him; as He is before God, so are we, holy, unblamable, and unreprouvable in His sight, partakers of His life, joint-heirs with Him of all the promises.

This, beloved friends, is our position before God ; this our standing in Christ. There is an entirely new headship in the second Adam. We are presented in a new character to God, such as man never had before-man without sin in the presence of God, the very pattern of God's mind and delight. We find difficulty, it may be, in apprehending it, because of the weakness of the flesh. The moment I look at myself, I have another man full of failure. But I stand there as having had sin for ever put away. The knowledge of this gives peace ; and we worship. Make sin what you please, let it take what form it may, you cannot mingle the state of man under law with the condition of the new, the heavenly, man in heaven.

The Lord grant us to know what we are in His love.

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