

Blessed is the Man

A Study of the Believer Under
the Old Covenant

Author: Anonymous
May 1984

Editor: Chad Thompson
August 2005

BLESSED IS THE MAN
The Believer Under the Old Covenant¹

When attempting to assimilate from the Scriptures a truly apostolic view of the Law, its purpose, character, and force, we are faced with what appear to be both positive and negative presentations. Paul’s statements concerning it definitely show it to be something useful in a variety of ways, but especially in 2 Cor. 3, for example, the Law and the Law Covenant² seem to be ‘disparaged’. Admittedly, it may be seen as such only in light of what has replaced it; i.e., faith, grace, life, sonship, indwelling Spirit as over against works, legality, death, servitude, externally imposed code. God’s Law, Paul says, viewed WITHOUT REFERENCE to the sinfully weak nature upon which it was imposed is “holy, just, and good” (Rom. 7:12). Viewed WITH REFERENCE to that nature, however, it is deadly. The very same commandment that was intended to bring life, actually produced death (Rom. 7:10-11).

In light of this kind of disparaging language used by Paul in speaking of the great distinctions between the Law Covenant of Moses and the New Covenant which is gracious in character, a problem develops as we view old testament believers who, rather than feeling crushed by the law (the kind of thing that Paul describes as being the ministry of the Law) actually rejoiced in it, calling that man blessed whose delight is in the Law (Psalms 1 and 119 are examples). Classically Reformed interpretations, which minimize the distinctions between the covenants and seek to homogenize them, cannot deal adequately with the theology of Paul here. But on the other hand, the experience of Old Covenant saints as recorded in the Scriptures cannot be dismissed! Any view of the Law that cannot account for the whole range of experience of those under it, or the whole range of apostolic commentary on it, cannot be a Biblical view, no matter how well it may handle one or two aspects of the subject. Unfortunately, history shows that the tendency of interpreters has often been to develop a system that accounts well for one or two areas, and then exert whatever effort is necessary to shave, whittle, and contort whatever doesn’t seem to fit until it does fit. Or to use another metaphor, how many alterations do you make in one suit before you recognize you bought the wrong one?

What follows is an attempt on my part to bring together Scriptural testimony on the subject of the believer’s experience under the Old Covenant, make some observations, and finally to draw some conclusions. I am not seeking to establish a system but to relate and correlate what is established as factual.

+++++

It has been offered that when David, for example, speaks of the Law as being his delight, he is using the word “Law” in the sense of “the Word of God,” the Scriptures themselves. This may indeed be true in some cases, but it fails to address the larger issue, namely the expressed attitude of blessing, happiness, and satisfaction on the part of Old Covenant saints that characterized their spiritual experience, and to which they gave utterance as they wrote. According to what Paul says in his letters about the law, blessing and happiness and satisfaction are NOT things that the law brings to those that live under it. On the contrary, he speaks of the law bringing servitude, frustration, and even fomenting sin! Where or how is reconciliation possible in these

¹As editor I have made some minor changes in grammar and punctuation in order to make the paper consistent throughout. Also, any and all footnotes are my later additions made for the purpose of clarification or to strengthen a point. My purpose in these notes is not to correct anything in the author’s paper, but to aid the reader who may be very unfamiliar with the issue at hand. All footnotes belong to the editor.

²When used to describe a covenant, the words, “Law”, “Old”, “Mosaic”, “Siniatic” are all terms intended to refer to the same covenant made with Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai.

things? Here are my ideas:

A key text in unraveling this knot is, I believe, Galatians 3. In the section that begins with the words “Consider Abraham . . .” Paul establishes the priority of the promises given to Abraham over the Law. These promises yield priority for two reasons. First, because the Abrahamic promises came first in time, and secondly because it is manifest that the Sinaitic Covenant grew out of the former covenant made with Abraham. That my second assertion is a true one may be established by such texts as Exodus 2:24; 3:6, 8-10, 13-17; Deut. 6:10, among many others. The basis of the Passover event, for example, is not the righteousness of the people, or the legitimacy of their cause, but the promise to Abraham, see Gen. 15:13-14. In the Galatians text Abrahamic priority is clear. The Covenant of Promise has priority over the Law, or as Paul argues, “The Law, established 430 years later does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.” The idea is to keep focused on what is central, what is the main artery, rather than on a branch or spur. The fact that Paul views the Law as a branch or spur is clear from what he says in Gal. 3:19ff. “What then was the purpose of the Law? It was ADDED because of transgressions UNTIL the promised Seed had come.” I have capitalized the important words “added” and “until” in order to highlight Abrahamic priority. What was the Law added to? The context of the chapter will admit to only one answer, I think, only one conclusion. The Law was added to the stream of progress of the Abrahamic Covenant. In doing so it did not de-rail or displace or supercede the Covenant of Promise, to which it was temporarily added UNTIL the Seed (the subject of the Abrahamic promise, or the main one anyway) should come. The Abrahamic Covenant is the mainstream. In thinking about the Law, so much confusion would be avoided if we kept clearly in mind that the Law was a temporary or parenthetical condition operative within and DESIGNED TO SERVE the flow and progress of the Abrahamic promises.

The problem with the Law Covenant (with the use that men make of it) is that it is a usurper. It seems to be straining to overpower the covenant it was created to serve (Paul describes this characteristic in the allegorical treatment he gives to the story of Sarah and Hagar in 4:21ff.) The Law always wants to REIGN instead of SERVE. When it does, the results are catastrophic. When Paul asserts that the Law was our custodian to lead us to Christ he is merely illustrating this very truth. Christ is the Seed, the subject of the promise in the Abrahamic Covenant, and as such the Law serves the Seed. When we permit the Law to lead us off in another direction, not to Christ, but into its own “custody” it can no longer be said to be serving its God-ordained function. In fact, this reverses the Biblical order exactly; the Law leads to Christ, not Christ to the Law. Rather, Christ is the end of the Law to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). At some point the Law releases us to Christ. It must not be permitted to continue to hold our hand in the presence of the one to whom we are to be turned over.³

Once it can be clearly seen that the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises is the mainstream, the way is made clear for us to address the question of the Old Covenant believer and his spiritual experience. Again, we need to heed the apostolic exhortation, “Consider Abraham”!

Abraham is called in Gal. 3 and elsewhere “the man of faith”. Paul presents in Gal. 3 an irrefutable case for the priority of justification by faith. He does this by establishing the priority of the Covenant of Promise. Since promise came first, faith came first. Since the Law does not de-rail, displace, or supercede the promise, works does not de-rail, displace, or supercede faith as the ground of justification. These two points hang together. Drop the priority of the Covenant of Promise and you will drop the priority of faith. Establish the priority of the Law Covenant, and you establish the priority of works over faith. Note Gal. 3:18. Promise/faith is one modality, Law/works another. I don’t really know much about electronics, but in our fellowship I’ve used

³Paul is speaking here as a Jewish Christian. That is, one who was, for a time, literally under the guardianship of the Law. The Law was put in place, insofar as Paul is now considering it, in order to preserve, protect, and teach the people of Israel until the promised Seed should come. When he came, he would bring the Spiritual blessing of justification (Gal. 3:8), as well as the indwelling Holy Spirit (regeneration, or true sonship) as a covenant blessing meant for every participant of the New Covenant. Since this was the goal of the prior Abrahamic Covenant all along, and the Law, as a part of its covenant, was put in place merely to prepare Israel for it, once the goal arrives, the Law can no longer serve this function. See especially Gal. 4:1-7.

the analogy of the AM and FM bands on a radio to describe this. You just can't be on two bands at the same time, its either one or the other. This theme, that of the incompatibility of these two modes of spiritual existence, characterizes Pauline theology consistently. His contention is uniform; promise/faith is the prior and current modality. Even the introduction of the Siniatic Covenant has not changed this. The absence of a previous Covenant of Promise, the absence of the priority of faith as a response to promise, would have left us with Law/works as the prevailing modality of justification. But it is not so. Abraham is called father, not Moses!

Romans 4 deals with the same issue, but viewed from a different vantage point. In Galatians Paul is standing in a place on the time-line that is looking back on a superceded Old Covenant, back to the priority of Abraham and his covenant. In Rom. 4 he shifts position to Abraham's day. The Mosaic Covenant is, from this ground, yet unknown and unanticipated. In what modality do we find Abraham? Of course, he is in faith/promise. It is all he knows. He trusts God's promise, that is, he responds to it in faith, and it is credited to him as righteousness. It is notable that the faith/promise mode assumes lack of indigenous righteousness.

Paul goes on to assert the priority of faith/promise by pointing out that this accreditation of righteousness occurred prior to circumcision (circumcision having become associated with Law/works by his post-Mosaic descendants). The question of the condition of Abraham with regard to his spiritual experience is clearly settled, then. His happiness, satisfaction, and blessedness was a matter of faith or trust in the promise of God. It was clearly NOT Law-based. Jesus could say, "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn. 8:56). How could he say this? By responding in faith to the promise of God concerning the "Seed," Abraham was living beyond his own day, in the day of Christ. But this is always the way with faith. It always lives "beyond." The faith/promise mode always brings the believer into life lived in the future, that is, in the day of fulfilled promises.

When we come to the case of David, we come right to the heart of the matter, however, because David lived "under the Law." The question is how to explain the lively and rich spiritual life that David experienced, if, as Paul says, those who live under the Law are doomed to walk around like the living dead, continually bowed down by their inability to respond to the Law's stringent demands. How do we account for the fact that David was not constantly crying out, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death" (although the Psalms occasionally display something like this sentiment)? The answer that Rom. 4 supplies is simply this: the Abrahamic Covenant, still very much in force right through and over the parenthetical Law Covenant, formed the basis of his spiritual experience. David was living, as did Abraham, squarely in the faith/promise mode. In this sense Abraham was truly his father. In fact this is what it really means to be a son of Abraham, to live as he did in the faith/promise mode. Read carefully Rom. 4:9-25. The sons of Abraham walk in the footsteps of their father. He is the father of all, circumcised or not (that is, irrespective of the condition of being under the Law Covenant), who live by faith as he did, trusting in (and rejoicing in!) the promise of God. It is in this way that Abraham saw fulfilled the prophecy/promise that he would be the father of many nations. David was a true son of Abraham. His rejoicing, his vital spiritual experience, his satisfaction in the Lord, his "blessedness" are not derived from the Law but from his faith in God's promises. The presence of the Law Covenant tends to obscure our realization, our view, that the Abrahamic Covenant was always in force; that it was, in fact, the over-riding force behind the giving of the Law, the possession of the land, and, ultimately, the coming of the Messiah. Additionally, whatever satisfaction, blessing, and spiritual vigor was experienced by the believing in Israel is to be attributed to IT (the Abrahamic Covenant), its promises, and NOT to the Law Covenant which was brought in alongside it to serve another purpose.

The Law is not gracious. Grace and Law are antithetical in many ways, as they assume dominance in the covenants they oversee. The grace apparent in Israelite history, the grace that forgave and relented in the face of persistent disobedience over hundreds of ears CANNOT BE FOUND IN THE ARTICLES OF THE SINIATIC COVENANT. How then do we account for its undeniable presence? God's promises to Abraham sustained that nation and its believing remnant when from the beginning the articles of the Law Covenant were trampled

underfoot. How, looking at Deut. 28-30, can we explain the prophet's frequent cry that Israel would not ultimately perish? Outside of the prevailing promises of the Abrahamic Covenant there is no explanation. Grace, in the Old Covenant has its source in Genesis 15, NOT Exodus 20. And the old testament saints were well aware of that fact!

When appealing in prayer for God to spare the nation from the judgement it richly deserved under the terms of the Old Covenant, the only ground of appeal is seen to be the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Consider the following Scriptures as demonstration of this: Ex. 32:11-14; Deut. 9:25-29; 2 Ki. 13:22-23; Neh. 9:29-37; Daniel 9:1-27. Note the very remarkable dual usage of the phrase "covenant of love" in the Nehemiah and Daniel texts. In the darkest days of idolatry, unfaithfulness, or in the infrequent times of revival, the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises are hearkened back to as the source of divine mercy and blessing.

Isaiah 51 is also instructive in this regard. This chapter, in the midst of the most intensely Messianic portion of the book, opens with a call to the true believers in Israel, "Listen to me you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord;" a call to look for hope in the promises made to Abraham, "Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn, Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on her ruins. He will make her deserts like Eden and her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing." The text continues to prophecy the gospel blessings to come to Israel in her Redeemer, the calling of the Gentiles, each of which we would recognize as both Messianic and Abrahamic in character ("the Seed was Christ").

It is an accurate and significant observation that nowhere and under no circumstances are the people encouraged to look the their father Moses, nor is the Law brought out as an object of hope or source of comfort, nor is it brought forward as the basis of an appeal for mercy, having neither hope nor mercy to minister.

+++++

Earlier I said that faith always lives beyond its time. This was true of Abraham, who rejoiced to see the day of Christ (John 8:56), of David, who could already speak of imputed righteousness in his own day (Psalm 32:1-2), something we normally think of as being a New Covenant blessing. It was also true of all the believing remnant in Israel who lived in anticipation of the dawning of the Messianic age — not because it would usher in an age of political sovereignty, but because it would usher in righteousness!

Unbelief cannot raise its eyes beyond and above the horizon. The law/works syndrome does not live in a state of anticipation, but is mired in the present. It knows only what IS, and cannot follow the God who calls things that are not yet as though they were. It is a stranger to true faith and experiences only two dimensions, past and present. Its concentration is on the now, the visible, the letter, the external code, servile obedience. It is profoundly disturbed by change of any sort.

Faith, on the other hand is never content to live in the present, but always longs for the future, for the age of fulfilled promise, to that which is better. Whether we speak of David, Abraham, Enoch, or others, their attitude is expressed in this language form Hebrews 11:

All these were living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance [the author says "only," but even this could NOT be said of the great mass of Israelites]. And they admitted that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own [wasn't earthly Canaan their own?]. If they has been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had

opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one [not earthly Canaan]. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God [this is the language of the covenant] for he has prepared a city for them.

It is apparent from what we have looked at, that there is an intimate connection between the New Covenant and the covenant that God made with Abraham. This intimacy is derived from the fact that the Abrahamic Covenant, the covenant that promised the Messiah, was the “father” of the New Covenant which revealed the Messiah and gave Him to us. The “hope of Israel” was the appearance in the world of the death and resurrection of the Messiah, Acts. 13:32. So it was understood by both Mary and Zechariah, Luke 1. They (the Abrahamic and the New) are both covenants in which “the just shall live by faith,” whose basis is not law but promise. Believers, under the old economy were such because they operated in the faith/promise mode, and they experienced:

- a) justification (Romans 4:1-5)
- b) imputed righteousness (Romans 4:6)
- c) forgiveness of sins (Romans 4:7)

But, and this point cannot be emphasized enough, this experience was by no means widespread among those who were the sons of Abraham according to the flesh. The Old Covenant comprised a mixed multitude at best. This was the experience not of all the circumcised, but exclusively of those who constituted the “election according to grace” as Paul calls the believing remnant of Israel. The true sons of Abraham are those who follow in his footsteps, who are circumcised in their hearts (Romans 2:28-29), by the Spirit.

And this leads to the last, but in some ways the most important point, and it has to do with the function of the Holy Spirit in the former age, the old testament economy.

As one reads the old testament, it becomes clear that circumcision, the national “sign” of Israel, has two connotations – it is used in two ways.

- 1) It physically marked all those descended from Abraham, those who would be beneficiaries of the covenant promises. It was taken up again in the Law Covenant to mark those upon whom the covenant was binding. It described national Israel.
- 2) There is another use of the term, one in which a figurative character is prominent. There is something called “circumcision of the heart” first mentioned by Moses in Deut. 30. In that amazing text which foretells the faultiness of the Mosaic Law Covenant there is a prophecy that one day all Israel would receive not a physical but a spiritual circumcision, a circumcision of the heart which would result in spiritual enablement - “so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul and live.” Comparing this with what Jesus said about the greatest commandment upon which all the law and the prophets hang, its clear that the requirement can only be accomplished in and by those circumcised of heart (Matt. 22:34-40).

Jeremiah uses this same terminology in chapters 4 and 9 of his book. A comparison of this ‘circumcised heart’ motif with Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 (chapters plainly prophetic of the New Covenant)⁴ clearly indicates that the “law written on the heart” and the “giving of a new heart,” the “putting of the Spirit within,” all have the same results, that is, they produce a genuine, internal godliness of a kind that pleases God. Since they all produce the same result, are we not justified in concluding that they are speaking of one and the same experience? I certainly think that we are.

⁴Clearly there are those who disagree with such statements. In order to do so they must ignore not only the language of the prophecies themselves, but also such clear passages in the New Testament as Hebrews 8.

The fact that the Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 texts are admittedly prophetic does not negate the heart circumcision experience as a contemporary one. This is proven, I believe, by referencing the Isaiah 51 text in which, in v. 7, the spiritual children of Abraham, addressed in vv. 1 and 2, are referred to as those who have “the law written in their hearts.”⁵ These facts lead me to conclude that this ministry of the Spirit called variously heart circumcision, having the law written on the heart, the giving of a new heart, were and remain the experience of the redeemed under Old and New Covenants; that this benefit is connected with the Abrahamic and New Covenants (intimately connected); that it comprised no part of the articles of the Siniatic Covenant, and that it is always connected in the Scriptures with the faith/promise mode of existence and not law-keeping. The Holy Spirit and his ministry to the believer in any age is the gift of God, blowing where he wills, and is the only cause of righteousness in the life of any child of God.

⁵This could perhaps be better demonstrated by the wording of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31, in which the prophet states, “and they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord . . .” (v. 34). In other words, Jeremiah foresees a time when the circumstances of the covenant people of God will be radically different than they were in his day, under the Old Covenant. And how, precisely, are those days of his described? Jeremiah describes the present situation of the covenant people of God as one in which some of the people found it necessary to instruct the others that they were in dire need of knowing God. Surely this means that those voicing the concern did, in fact, know God themselves! In fact, comparing vv. 31,32, and 34, the difference becomes obvious: “Behold days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, NOT LIKE the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt . . . FOR they shall ALL (instead of only a few) know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them . . .”