



The Curse of Law

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the way the Mosaic Law functions within salvation history. The position presented is that the Mosaic Law was intended by God to be a temporary covenant. Further, the new covenant to which the Mosaic Law pointed stands as a way of life that is different in nature to the way of life under the Law. The ideas in this paper are not new; the insight that the Mosaic Law is fulfilled in Christ owes much to theologians such as Martin Luther. The approach to the contrasting New Covenant life as one of the Spirit and love was most famously developed by theologians such as Richard Sibbes and Jonathan Edwards. Clarifying our views on the Mosaic Law's role in salvation history will have massive impact on the way we relate to God - all too often we assume that God deals with us in a way that is shaped by the Law. Our preaching, feelings, teaching and lives all too often suffer from the problems that flow from the idea that God relates to us in a way that has more in common with the Mosaic Law than the New Covenant Gospel. It is the contention of this paper that much of the joy, freedom and power of the Christian Gospel is derived from the way Jesus liberated us from the Mosaic Law to live a life of Spirit empowered love.

- The Importance of understanding Law
- The Bible's teaching about Law
- The Bible's way out of Law's Curse
- Orientation to Preaching the Mosaic Law
- The Difference it all Makes
- Appendix: False Avenues

"Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God. And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it." The Mosaic Law, Deut. 28:62-63

The Importance of understanding Law

The Mosaic Law is a hugely important topic in the Bible. In the Old Testament the Law dominated the life of Israel from almost the start of the Bible story to the final prophet. In the New Testament many of the books are concerned with explaining how the Law relates to the Gospel. The aim of this essay is to clarify some of the big claims the Bible makes about the Law, and show why thinking through this issue is of fundamental importance for our relationship with God. Our view of the Law directly impacts our view of the Gospel. This makes examining our assumptions about Law both vital and uncomfortable. One essay cannot solve every problem or explain in detail every relevant nuance of the Bible plotline. Hopefully the reader will work to read through the books of the Bible to discover what the Scriptures themselves teach. They are our authority and measure. While our understanding is often shallow and confused, the Scriptures are profound and clear. Our prayer should be that having clarified the relevant issues pertaining to our view of the Law, we can return to the Bible better equipped to make sense of what the Living God is saying to us today.

What should we make of the claims made about the Law in the Scriptures? A selection of quotations from the New Testament will help us see the complexity and importance of the topic-

Matthew 5:17-18

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Matthew 11:13

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,

Luke 16:16-17

The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

John 1:17

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Acts 13:38-39

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Acts 15:5

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 18:13

...saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law."

Romans 2:23

You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law.

Romans 2:25

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

Romans 3:19-21

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

Romans 3:28

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Romans 4:13-16

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Romans 5:20

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

Romans 6:14-15

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

Romans 7:4-6

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

Romans 7:8-9

But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

Romans 7:12

So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Romans 7:14

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

Romans 8:2-4

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 10:4

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Romans 13:8

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

1 Cor. 9:20-21

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

Galatians 2:16

yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 2:21

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Galatians 3:2

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Galatians 3:5

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—

Galatians 3:10-13

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—

Galatians 3:19

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

Galatians 3:23-24

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

Galatians 5:3-4

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Galatians 5:18

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Galatians 6:2

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

Ephes. 2:15

...by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

Philip. 3:9

...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

Hebrews 10:1

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

A fair reading of the above texts would require explanation of the surrounding book and the stage of salvation history being dealt with. However even without that contextual work, the selection of quotations makes very clear that the topic of Law is one that is both complex and important to the argument of the New Testament. That alone should be enough to encourage all Christians to long to better understand what the Bible teaches on the topic. The Bible must set the agenda for our thinking and priorities. If the Mosaic Law is a major topic of Scripture, then it must be a major priority of life to think rightly about it. At first the topic may seem irrelevant to ministry and Christian living, but God knows best. The topics He selected to deal with in the Bible are exactly the ones ordained by His infinite wisdom to equip us for salvation. Put simply, the topic of Law is important to us because it is important in the Bible.

The Bible's Teaching about Law

We will attempt to summarise the main things taught by the Bible about the Mosaic Law under five headings-

1. Nature of the Mosaic Law
2. Effect of the Mosaic Law
3. Purpose of the Mosaic Law
4. Relationship of Mosaic Law to Jesus
5. Relationship of Mosaic Law to Christians

1. Nature of the Mosaic Law

The Bible is a story with development and change from start to finish. This feature of the Bible has led to it being understood as 'salvation historical' or 'progressive revelation'. The Bible is not a collection of timeless principles; it is a story relating how God acts and how His plan for the universe works out. There is a point in the Bible story when the world is brought into existence and there is stage when that world is judged by Jesus. The two stages of the story are distinct and should not be blurred into one event! Similarly there was a stage in the story before Jesus was born, and there is a stage after that event. In many ways this is an obvious point to make about the Scriptures, but the importance of salvation history in seeing the nature of the Law is often missed.

As a result of the salvation historical nature of the Bible, the Law cannot be assumed to be a set of timeless principles that are always to be applied to God's people. Clearly there was a time before the Law- the question is how the law works out in salvation history after its appearance in the story. The answer given by the New Testament is that the Mosaic Law was a **temporary** dispensation. It was given to Moses for the ruling of Israel, but was never intended by God to govern the way by which people would always relate to God. The temporary nature of the Mosaic Law can be seen in Galatians-

Galatians 3:19

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, *until* the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...

Galatians 3:23-26

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned *until* the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian *until* Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are *no longer under a guardian*, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Paul is explaining how the Law worked out in the history of Israel. The basic point is that the Law was a temporary means of ruling Israel till Christ came. After that event the Law was no longer Israel's guardian. The simplicity and force of this point is often neglected because we read into the text some of the false avenues explored above e.g. We think Paul is talking about legalism or some ceremonial aspect of the Law. However he is talking about the Mosaic Law. As part of his defence of the Gospel in Galatians Paul states that the Mosaic Law was a temporary stage of God's salvation history.

As the Mosaic Law is temporary, Paul can affirm that Christians are no longer subject to the Mosaic Law-

Romans 6:14-15

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

We are not yet going to explore the way a Christian does positively live, but it is clear that negatively Paul insists that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law. That way of relating to God was temporary. After Jesus came the Law ceased to be the thing that gives shape to a relationship with God. The reason the Law is temporary will be seen more clearly below, when we consider the relationship between the Law and Jesus.

The second important aspect of the nature of the Mosaic Law is its **unity**. People often miss the temporality of the Law because they assume that some parts of the Law remain in force for Christians. However the Law is viewed by Paul as a unity. If a person tried to extract some select commands from the Law to help them in their Christian living, they would in fact be committing themselves to obey the entirety of the Law-

Galatians 3:10

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by *all* things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

The 'works of the law' referred to by Paul appear from the argument of Galatians to be some select commandments of the Mosaic Law, certainly circumcision and probably some of the Sabbath laws. The Galatian Christians were using them to help them live their Christian lives. Paul makes the point that one cannot just decide to use one or two bits of the Law- the Law itself says that one is cursed unless all parts are kept.

Thus in Galatians 5:3 Paul wrote-

"I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law."

It is no good to keep one bit of the law- The Law is a unity and submitting to one part of it is acceptance of the totality. The popular modern approach to Law of saying that we should use parts of it to help us as Christians is simply not the way the New Testament approaches the topic.

The seemingly negative approach to Law taken by Paul to the nature of the Law meant that he felt it important to make a third comment about the nature of the Law. The Law is temporary and a unity, but it was in its nature a **good** thing from God. When somebody accepts the temporality of the Law there is no slur of the essential nature of holiness and goodness of that Law. So Paul states-

Romans 7:6-7

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

In verse 6 Paul says that a Christian no longer serves God by the old way of Law. He can see that this could lead to the charge of him saying the Law is bad, so he adds the comment in verse 7 that the Law is 'not sin'. Paul can affirm both truths- the Law is temporary and it is in and of itself a good thing.

In summary, the main claim that the New Testament makes about the nature of the Mosaic Law is that it was a **temporary** means by which God related to Israel. It is no longer the thing which should shape the lives of God's people. The **goodness** of the Law is necessary to affirm against misunderstandings that can arise from stating the temporality of Law, and the **unity** of the Law must be insisted upon in order to guard against approaches that attempt to undermine temporality by division.

2. Effect of the Mosaic Law

When the nation of Israel was bound under the Mosaic Law its effect was overwhelmingly negative. In terms of spiritual well being the Law acted as a conduit for sin. As regards the physical well being of the nation, the curses of the Law led to exile. It is important to remember that this effect of the Law is very different to the stated intention of the Law in salvation history, which will be discussed below. The reason for the contrast between intention and effect arises from the bondage to sin which has enslaved the hearts of all people since the Fall in Genesis 3. Thus the negative effect of the Law is not a negative comment on the Law itself, which we have already seen was a good gift from God. It is rather an exposure of the badness of the human heart.

There is immense support in the Scriptures for the claim that the effect of the Mosaic Law was negative in this way. Broadly the evidence falls into three categories, firstly the promises in the Old Testament prior to Exile that Israel would not be able to obey the Law, Secondly the Prophets' assessment that it was the failure to keep the Law that brought about Exile and thirdly the New Testament teaching that Law increases sin and brings wrath.

Thus we find passages such as-

Old Testament Promises-

Deut. 8:20

Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.

Deut. 30:1

"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you..."

Deut. 31:16-21

And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, ' Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?' And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods.

"Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant. And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring). For I know what they are inclined to do even today, before I have brought them into the land that I swore to give."

Joshua 24:1

But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

Prophetic Assessment-

Psalm 78:1

They did not keep God' s covenant,
but refused to walk according to his law.

Jeremiah 9:12-13

Who is the man so wise that he can understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken, that he may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through? And the Lord says: "Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice or walked in accord with it."

Jeremiah 11:6-8

And the Lord said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them. For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not."

Amos 2:4

Thus says the Lord:

"For three transgressions of Judah,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they have rejected the law of the Lord,
and have not kept his statutes,
but their lies have led them astray,
those after which their fathers walked.

New Testament Teaching-

Romans 5:20

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

The proclamation of Law is described as, "the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone."
2 Cor 3:7

Galatians 3:22-23

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

Thus it can be said that from the moment the Mosaic Law was given, the outpouring of God's wrath in the Mosaic Curse of Exile was inevitable. The hearts of Israel were such that the Law could never have been anything other than a dead end road. The Bible backs that view up with promises given before exile that it would be so, assessment after the event that it was so and teaching in the New Testament that explains the reasons. The

effect of the Mosaic Law was negative in that it brought wrath upon Israel. Due to the sinfulness of the human heart it is inevitable that Law has this effect- “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Romans 3:19)

3. Purpose of the Mosaic Law

The actual stated purpose of the Mosaic Law that flows out of its own holy nature is threefold. Firstly the Mosaic Law reveals God, secondly it ruled the nation of Israel and thirdly, in salvation history it led the way from the days of the old covenant under Law to the days of the new covenant in Jesus.

The character of God was revealed in the commandments given to Moses; different aspects in different commandments, but overwhelmingly the majestic holiness and purity of God is unveiled in the Law.

That the Mosaic Law was given to rule Israel is demonstrated by the fact that Moses commanded the nation to obey the Law, and several times after that the nation was recommitted to obedience of the Law or rebuked for their failure to obey. See for example Exodus 24:3-8; Joshua 24:24-27; Ezra 8; Malachi 4:4.

The New Testament states in a number of places that the Law was intended to lead in salvation history to Jesus (e.g. Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:24-25). Thus the Law is said to have a prophetic function (Matthew 11:13). This prophetic function seems to work in at least two ways. Firstly the Law gives categories such as sacrifice, cleanness, righteousness and punishment. These categories are then picked up and used to explain the nature of the great salvation brought by Jesus in the New Covenant. Secondly the Mosaic Law itself has within itself hints of a new covenant radically different from the Mosaic Covenant. There is within the Law a seedbed which in the Prophetic Writings would later become the Spiritual blessing of a New Covenant. These hints include the promise of a new Prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-22) and the command to circumcise hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16); something that Moses promised Israel they would be unable to do until after the exile, when God would do it for them (Deuteronomy 30:6). Another interesting hint in the Law of a future new covenant is the reminder in Deuteronomy 23:5 that God turned curses into blessing when Balaam was ordered to curse God’s people- a tantalising thing to mention just before the Mosaic curses and blessings are detailed.

The Law led towards Jesus in ways additional to the prophetic. It also shaped the history of Israel in such a way that they came to need a saviour- without the Law there would have been no exile. With no exile there would have been no need for the Prophets to restate God’s love for Israel and promise a new salvation that would be better than the original exodus (Isaiah 19:16-25; Jeremiah 23:5-8; Jeremiah 30-32). The Law controlled the history of Israel in such a way that the saving act of God in Christ came to be necessary and natural to the Scripture story.

The most important intended function of the Mosaic Law was that it led to Jesus in such a way that he actually fulfilled the Law. It not only prepared the way for and pointed to the Christ, the Law was satisfied in Jesus. This leads us to our next section-

4. Relationship of Mosaic Law to Jesus

The fundamental New Testament claim about the relationship between the Law and Jesus is that Jesus has fulfilled the Law. So Jesus said,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matthew 5:17)

It is often thought that Jesus' claim that he did not come to abolish the Law is an absolute statement that brings with it every overtone the word 'abolish' can carry. In reality the meaning of the negative 'abolish' in the sentence must be related to the positive contrast, 'fulfil'. When this is done it becomes clear that it is a mistake to assume that because Jesus said he did not come to abolish the Law that he meant by this statement that he did not come to end the reign of the Law. That is, abolition in this verse is contrasted with fulfilment. Thus to abolish, would in this context mean 'to ignore the proper intention of' or 'to sweep aside in a meaningless way.' Fulfilment means 'to bring to the intended consummation or end.' Jesus fulfilled the Law, which means that he brought it to its God intended end. Once the Law has been fulfilled in Jesus, then the function of Law will necessarily be very different. What Jesus is teaching fits with Paul's claim in Romans 10:4 that, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." That is, Christ is the end towards which the Law was intended to move. Once that end goal has been reached, then the thing which was moving towards the goal will no longer operate in the same way.

As an illustration of this, consider a step on a set of escalators in a building. The step is designed with the intention of carrying people up a level in a building. This is the end or purpose of its existence. To achieve that end it is designed in such a way that people can get on and stand safely while being carried upwards. Once a person gets off the escalator step at the top of the staircase, the fulfilment has been reached. From that moment onwards the step functions in a different way; instead of moving upwards in a level fashion that can be stood upon, the step slides under the floor and travels downwards, upside down. It can no longer be stood upon safely! On its descent the step functions very differently from when it was moving upwards towards fulfilment. It is incorrect to say that the step has been abolished because it moves downwards- it has fulfilled its intended purpose by carrying a person to the top of the escalator. Abolition of the step would mean an improper destruction of the step- something like a bomb or fire would achieve abolition. This possibility of improper abolition does nothing to detract from the fact that after fulfilment, the step functions in a very different way to before fulfilment. If somebody was to try and stand on an escalator step that has past its intended moment of fulfilment, there would be very serious problems!

The Law has not been abolished when Jesus brings its reign to an end, because fulfilment in Jesus was always the proper appointed end of the Mosaic Law. In short, Jesus has fulfilled the Law and this means that the Mosaic Law can never again be assumed to work in the way it did in the past before Jesus had fulfilled it.

How did Jesus fulfil the Mosaic Law? Jesus was, "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." (Galatians 4:4-5) Jesus was the perfect Israel who never sinned, and as such lived out the perfect righteousness of God. However, Jesus died bearing the wrath of God- that is the curse of the Law. The citations Paul uses from the Old Testament in Galatians are precise and moving- "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by

becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Galatians 3:13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23) Jesus died bearing the curse of the Law. He did not deserve that curse, but out of infinite love he did it for the cursed creatures that did deserve it. The blood of Jesus which dripped from a Roman execution pile purchased the redemption of those who should have faced the eternal dereliction of God's righteous wrath. In his body, Jesus soaked up the horrifying depth of God's legal anger at sin. He did this in order to sweep aside the commandment that would otherwise condemn all people to hell. He did it so that those who should be convicted by God's Law can stand free and righteous. God turned the curse of Balak into a blessing by the words of a donkey (Numbers 22-24) and Balaam rightly asked,

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? (Numbers 23:8)

King David admitted that it was God's right to curse his King;

"Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head." But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, ' Curse David,' who then shall say, ' Why have you done so?' "And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me, and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today." So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust." (2 Samuel 16:9-13)

On the cross God cursed Jesus, his great Davidic King. He did so to sweep aside the curses of the Mosaic Law and enable him to offer the blessing promised to Abraham to the pagan nations (Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 2:11-16). The curse of wrath and death had lain over this earth since Genesis 3, the Mosaic Law formalised it and on the cross God finally fulfilled the Law and once for all turned his curse of wrath into a blessing. As the Law itself comments on the earlier example of Balaam-

"The Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you." (Deuteronomy 23:5)

It cost Jesus his life to fulfil the Law on our behalf. It was his great work and it was done out of love for the undeserving. Once the Law has been fulfilled in the death of Jesus, it can never operate in the same way as it did prior to fulfilment. If the Law continued to work the same way it would be a denial of the power and effectiveness of the death of Christ. As Paul said,

"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." (Galatians 2:21)

The fulfilment of the Law in Jesus penetrates to the heart of the New Testament Gospel, and raises the question of how the Mosaic Law relates to the New Covenant believer after the moment of fulfilment on the cross.

5. Relationship of Mosaic Law to Christians

The Christian is by definition a person who has been set free from the Mosaic Law. Liberation from Law is one of the rich blessings that Jesus died to procure for us. The rules and commandments that God gave Moses no longer act as the paradigm for a believer's life. It is tempting for a Christian to use things such as the Ten Commandments or Sabbath laws to shape their life and help them grow in godliness. In reality to do so is a denial of the New Covenant gospel. So Paul argued that to return to Law is in effect to commit adultery with a dead husband!

Romans 7:1-6

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

It is often assumed that Law will in some way help Christians grow in godliness and bear fruit for God. In fact Paul teaches here that having died to the Law a Christian is moved out of the realm of Law into the realm of Jesus. A person cannot belong to both Law and Jesus- one or the other must be the controlling paradigm for life. It is Jesus Christ who liberates from Law and sets us free to bear fruit for God in our daily living.

It stands to reason that there is a vast difference to the life that is shaped by Law and the life that is shaped by the gospel of Jesus. The Law commands us to 'do our righteousness'-

Deut. 6:25

And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.

The Gospel stands in stark contrast, for instead of commanding us to do our righteousness, the Gospel promises to give us God's righteousness-

Romans 3:21-24

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified (*made righteous*) by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

It is not in the nature of Law to give us righteousness as a gift, but it is the blessing of the Gospel to confer the pure and spotless righteousness of God upon us.

When this contrast between Law and Gospel is understood it becomes clear that the debate about whether or not a Christian should be in some sort of relationship to the Mosaic Law is highly significant. To say that a Christian has not been fully set free from the Mosaic Law is to imply that the death of Jesus did not procure for us the blessings the Bible claims it did. If we don't grasp the wonderful joy of being set free from Law we will fail to enjoy the pleasure of living out a life in the new way of faith that has been opened up to the nations by the cross. For Jesus did not go through the agony of crucifixion, divorcing us from the Law- only to put us back under bits of it again! No, the new life Jesus gives us is one that is lived in a fashion that is very different to that from which we have been rescued. We have been rescued from the Law so that, "we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." (Romans 7:6) We will now consider the riches of this new intimacy with God through His Spirit, which is the experience of all who have been set free from the Law.

The Bible's way out of Law's Curse

In the previous section we explored the negative aspect of Christian living- that we are not under Law. If Law does not shape a Christian's approach to life, what positively is the life of a follower of Jesus to be like? Having been set free from Law, what have we been set free for?

We will consider the answer under four headings that reflect some of the most important turning points of the Bible story-

1. The Abrahamic Covenant means the Christian lives by Faith

In Genesis 12 God promises Abraham an undeserved blessing- this is God's way of undoing the curse he put on the earth in Genesis 3. The blessing God promised Abraham was not just for him, it was to reach outwards to all nations. It is essential we grasp the nature of a promise. A promise is something that depends on the person making the promise. By initiating a rescue with a promise, God is making clear that salvation will depend on him and not the sinful people being rescued. The only appropriate response to a promise is to believe it- to have faith that the promise will come to pass. Thus in light of the Abrahamic Promise- people are to believe or have faith that the promise of God will prove true.

The New Testament makes clear that the promise in Genesis 12 was in fact the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed before it was worked out-

Galatians 3:8-9, quoting Genesis 12:3

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The Gospel that saves Christians today is the same Gospel that Abraham heard and trusted. The obvious difference is that when the Gospel was preached to him it was done so under the categories or types of a physical land and nation. After the Gospel has been revealed in Jesus we find these categories ratcheted up to their ultimate spiritual realities. Still, the differing form of presentation does not detract from the fact that faith is still to be the fundamental response to God's gospel promise.

Since God initiated his salvation plan with a Gospel promise, faith is to shape the nature of our relationship with God. We can see what this looks like by remembering the example of Abraham-

Romans 4:18-21

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Consider how radically different a life shaped by faith in the promise is, to a life controlled by obedience to the Law. The Law approach leads one to seek a rule to keep and work to obey it. If it is kept the job has been done. But faith leads a person to believe and deepen in conviction that God will do all he has promised. We can always deepen in our faith. No matter what happens we will not rest satisfied till we see the great things God has promised for us, yet we do rest satisfied, for we are convinced God will do as he has promised. In the face of enemies such as sin, suffering and death, Law keeping is worse than useless. What we need as we encounter these nemeses is the inner knowledge and belief that God is true to his word. Hell itself will not prevail against a person who trusts in God's promise. An ever deepening conviction that God is trustworthy and a waiting for Him to do what he has promised; this type of life is radically different from endeavouring to keep a rule. A Christian is to grow strong in faith. The Law can never stir up and deepen faith for it is not a promise.

When we see the depth and intimacy with God involved in the life of faith, we should be eternally thankful to God that we do not have to live by the Law. For the life of faith was not just for Abraham-

Romans 4:22-25

That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Faith in Jesus is to shape the Christian's life- not obedience to Law. As we look to Jesus rather than the Law, we find that in him we have a depth of righteousness that could never be achieved by the opposing route of Law. So Paul's passion and desire was to, "be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." (Philippians 3:9)

2. The Davidic Covenant means the Christian lives by the King

One of the central facts that arise from a reading of the Bible story is that God's plan for the universe centres on God's King. In the Old Testament David stood as the great king who killed God's enemies, built God's kingdom, suffered unjustly, wrote songs of passionate devotion to God and shepherded God's people. David failed to be God's true king for he was only a human foreshadowing of the great king. So he was given a promise

of a greater descendent who would rule for ever. This great King of David's line would stand in perfect relationship to God the Father- for God said, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. (2 Samuel 7:14a) and, "my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' " (2 Samuel 7:15-16) The King who enjoyed a perfect relationship with the Father would be the focal point for a people brought by grace into a perfect relationship with God. For the King who would in the latter days be born of the flesh of David and also be the son of God, would have the heart of his forefather King David.

The heart of King David was that of a man consumed by passion for the glory of God and the salvation of sinners. Even when suffering in the wilderness, David wanted only one thing- God. So he wrote in Psalm 63,

A Psalm of David, When he was in the wilderness of Judah.

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.
But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
they shall be given over to the power of the sword;
they shall be a portion for jackals.
But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

David loved God and found in the Lord the only relationship that can satisfy the human heart. But David's love for God was not selfish. He did not live as if he had a right to be the only one who enjoyed intimacy with God. Neither did he live as if he had earned the right to a relationship with God. David's heart was such that he longed for even his most despicable enemies to cleave to God as he did. Like Moses before him (Exodus 32:32) David's heart longed to die in the place of sinners.

So when David's son, Absalom rebelled against him in a disgusting manner (2 Samuel 13-18), the young man was killed for his rebellion. The Cushite who brought David news of

the victory thought David would be glad to hear the good news or gospel that the kingdom had been established and God's king had been saved- "And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the Lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you." (2 Samuel 18:31) But David was not the sort of King his men expected. David did not want a gospel that centred on his enemy dying to pay for his own sins. David's first concern was not for his own life but for the life of his enemy, "The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man."'" (2 Samuel 18:32) And with the characteristic brevity and restrained passion of the Hebrew Scriptures, we read how the heart of God's king was broken-

"And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"'" (2 Samuel 18:33)

The point is this- God's great king is Jesus. He has the heart of David- he loves God the Father perfectly and enjoys a blissful relationship with him. But Jesus is the King who has died for his enemies to give them the intimacy that he himself enjoys. The cost was infinite and the love was infinite. The salvation of Christians depends totally on God's king and not on us. Jesus is the one who gives us relationship with God- we do not earn or contribute to his great work of sacrifice. Since this is the case, Christians are to live by the King, not by obedience to rules. We are to shape our life by gazing on the excellencies of our King. As we more deeply perceive the glory, love, mercy and passion of our King, so we more intimately cleave to him and are caught up into the inexpressible joy of knowing him. As soon as a person starts to focus on obeying rules they are forced to shift the gaze of faith away from the king who bore the curses of law to carry us to heaven. A Christian must resist the temptation to rely on obedience to Law and instead be more deeply moved by the sufficiency of our great King's death to provide all things needful.

3. The New Covenant means the Christian lives by the Spirit

The Mosaic Law exposed the sinfulness of the human heart as Israel failed to keep the Law and therefore faced God's anger. As that anger played out in the form of exile, the Prophets arose who began to promise a new covenant that would be the fulfilment of all the earlier promises in a new and wonderful way. Finally the hearts of people would be circumcised so that they could know and serve God with intimacy. The only way for humans to actually know and experience God would be by God acting within them by His Spirit-

Ezekiel 36:25-26

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

People cannot live by second hand knowledge of God (Jeremiah 31:34). We need more than to just hear about God, we need God to live in us. When the Spirit of God was poured out on all nations in the New Testament days, it was to fulfil the expectations of the New Covenant. By the Spirit of Jesus, people can actually experience having their creator

dwelling in them. We should be excited to discover the blessings brought to us by the Spirit in the New Covenant. For we can boast in what Jeremiah said was the only thing worth boasting about-

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

By the Spirit of the infinite God coming to live in us, finite sinful people can boast of a personal knowledge and relationship with God. When God gives a person a new heart, God is utterly committed to loving and caring for that person who has been born of him-

Jeremiah 32:38-41

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

It is the work of God's Spirit to give Christians this profound relationship with God. From beginning to end we live by the Spirit. Now, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) Why would a person who lives by the Spirit of God, turn away from that life to rely on the Law, which brings death and wrath? Christians need to acquaint themselves with the riches of life that God communicates by His Spirit. The rebuke of Paul is timely-

Galatians 3:2-3

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

A Christian is not to obey rules- they lead only to external human centred righteousness. Rather a believer is to realise that the Spirit of God himself is within him, working to grow his own fruit of righteousness in us. This fruit is deeper than any obedience to Law could ever be, for the Law does not penetrate to the heart of man and does not give us anything like the Spirit of God living in us. By the Spirit we cry out to God, 'Abba Father' (Romans 8:15). This passionate intimacy with God comes by the Spirit, not the Law. And so our lives should be shaped by the work of God's Spirit rather than the Law. We need to get to know God better. For that we need the work of God in us- and that can be given only through His Spirit.

4. The Gospel means the Christian's love fulfils and transcends Law

We have already seen that the Mosaic Law contains within it aspects that point forward to the New Covenant, and while being part of the Law are not in and of themselves 'Law' to be obeyed, e.g. The promises of heart circumcision and a new prophet. The most important aspect of the Mosaic Law which is not in and of itself 'Law' is love. Jesus made it clear that love of God and neighbour is the greatest part of the Mosaic Law-

Mark 12:28-34

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

While Israel was commanded to love God, love by its nature is not a commandment. Love is something that all people know, and yet is difficult to define. As the theologian Jonathan Edwards commented, "Love is better felt than defined." While often eluding definition, we can say much to give a description of love. On the one hand love is the simplest thing in the world, instinctively grasped by the smallest child. On the other hand love is mysterious. All the plays, poems and writings of the greatest people this world has produced and still nobody can explain love. The Bible emphasises the value and power of love in many ways, not least in Song of Solomon-

Song 8:6-7

...for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the Lord.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
he would be utterly despised.

One thing that can be said for certain however is that love is not a commandment that may simply be 'kept'. A commandment is something to be obeyed, and it can only be kept or disobeyed. Love on the other hand is an inexhaustible passion. Nobody can ever say they have loved something as much as it can be loved- even in the greatest display of love, death for another (John 15:13), the motives and desires in operation could always have been deeper and purer. Love is a passion, devotion, concern, feeling, affection and desire. We all know that love is not simply a rule that can be met. We recoil from the idea that love is simply doing the right action or making the just decision. In other words we reject the idea that love can be reduced to a commandment, for a commandment is impersonal. Love is by its nature relational and personal- God is love, and as the God of infinite love, nobody will ever be able to say they have reached the end or plumbed the depths of God's love. To do so would necessitate being God.

Thus the nature of love means that when the Mosaic Law commanded Israel to love God and love their neighbours, they were being commanded to do something that could not be done by obedience to Law. The two commandments upon which all the Law depended are

actually commandments that point beyond that which the Mosaic Law could deliver. For love of God necessitates the inner new heart work of the Spirit, which was to happen under the New Covenant after return from exile. The Prophets promised that in the last days God would 'write his Law on the hearts of His people' (e.g. Jeremiah 31:33). What was meant by this was not that God would enable all Christians to obey the Mosaic Law regulations, but rather that in the New Covenant God's Spirit would indwell believers and create within them that love for God and others which the Law pointed to, but was unable to confer. We see God's love for us on the cross, and the Spirit of God makes this love real to us personally-

Romans 5:5

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Love both fulfils and transcends the Mosaic Law. No commandment could produce the Christian experience in all its depth and passion-

1 Peter 1:8-9

Though you have not seen Jesus, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Using the Law to attempt to shape our lives will always negate the importance of our passions and feelings, which reveal our true priorities and personhood. In addition using Law will always leave us with a shallow soil in which to cultivate our behaviour- we need to have something as complex and rich as love by which to shape our godliness, for life is in the end relational and complex. We may feel the need to rely on Laws to shape our lives, but it is a shallow and anti-gospel approach to life. The Gospel way is to maintain that the only thing that counts is, "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). This love is not natural to sinful people- it is the divine work of the Spirit in all Christians. This heavenly love truly fulfils the Law (Galatians 5:14) but in the final analysis it is a reality that belongs to the New Covenant work of God's Spirit and so transcends the Law.

Excursus: Situational Ethics?

One response to focusing on the centrality of love in the Christian life is to dismiss the teaching as 'situational ethics' (An approach that is akin to utilitarianism and post-modernity in suggesting that we pursue a vague notion of 'love' that could mean different things for different people in different situations.). It is important to stress that the wrong approach to love in situational ethics is very different to the nature of Christian love being presented in this paper. The love that resides in the heart of a Christian is the divine work of God's Spirit. As such it is an expression of the holy God who hates sin and loves righteousness. The love that the Spirit stirs up in us will love the things God loves. It will be shaped by the Word of the Spirit in Scripture and hence will endeavour to stand against the sin of the world. In situations where the world claims that it's sin is justified as being a loving thing to do, the Spirit and Scriptures will urge us to suffer rather than compromise. The Gospel, Scriptures and the Spirit mean that Christian love is not at all vague or open to reformulation in the image of the world.

Our sinful flesh longs to live by laws that can be kept and our human fear of failure tempts us towards a simplistic man centred religion. But God has loved us in His Son, and by His Spirit he creates a new life of love within us. As we contemplate the wonder of the New Covenant Gospel, the question Jesus asked Peter at the end of John's Gospel calls us to a relationship with our Lord far deeper than anything obedience to Law can offer- "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:16)

Orientation to Preaching the Mosaic Law

Much of the Old Testament records the Mosaic Law and how Israel fared under its rule. The modern day Christian may be set free from the Law, but that does not mean we should neglect preaching the sections of Scripture that are concerned with it. However it does mean that we must be careful to not teach the Mosaic Law in a way that allows hearers to think they are to live under bits of the Law- or even in a way that is analogous to the Mosaic Law. Such a life style would be anti-gospel. Below are some suggestions that may begin to orient us to a preaching of the Law that brings people to faith in the Gospel rather than slavery to the Law.

1. Contrast to the Gospel

The Mosaic Law is radically different to the Gospel. The default assumption of people is that God will relate to them in a way that is shaped by obedience to rules. Our preaching of the Law must guard against the suggestion that the Christian life is lived by trying hard to obey regulations. We must help people understand why the Law inevitably led to God's wrath in salvation history. When the contrast between Law and Gospel is explored the effect is to make the riches and wonder of the Gospel appear all the more attractive and powerful.

2. Categories for the Gospel

The Mosaic Law gave vivid types that pointed forward to the Gospel- ritual uncleanness, temple, sacrifice etc. The New Testament uses these to preach the Gospel to us. We often neglect the subtlety and diversity of these categories. For example, in the Temple beautiful fragrance was used- Paul uses this imagery to present issues as diverse as financial support of ministry (Phil.4:18) and the impact of the Gospel on the elect and non-elect (2 Cor.2:14-17). All too often we assume that a vague grasp of the images such as temple and sacrifice has exhausted the categories of the Law. However each detail in the Law can open up fresh aspects of the Gospel- how does uncleanness differ from a legal transgression? What do each of the different sacrifices tell us about the Gospel to which they point? There is much opportunity to explore the Gospel through the typology of the Mosaic Law.

3. Cost of the Gospel

Our preaching of the Law is a great opportunity to touch people's hearts with the humbling news that the freedom of the new covenant did not come totally free- it came at great cost to the lamb who died under the Law's curse. The cost of our new covenant life was huge to Jesus, so that it could be free to us. Exploring the horror of the Mosaic curses and how they were laid on the head of Jesus should move us to wonder again at the depth of love that resides in the heart of God to sinful people.

4. Continuity of sinful hearts

It is common in many traditions to preach the law to hearers in such a way that they feel broken because they themselves have failed to obey it and need rescue. This can be done in a way that actually clouds the power of the Gospel in people's thinking. Sensitivity to the continuity of sinful hearts in salvation history means we do not have to preach the Law to people in this direct way. Instead we can show people how things worked out when the Law was preached for many years to the nation of Israel. The Old Testament story shows us that the sinful hearts of Israel meant they could not obey and could not escape the wrath of exile. As people today have sinful hearts just like Israel we know that we would fare no better, but thankfully are not expected to live under the Law. The deadening force of the Mosaic Law can be seen in the history of Israel. The continuity of our sinful hearts with theirs moves us to cry out for a better way- the Gospel.

The Difference it all Makes

There is an urgent need for Christians to work at understanding the nature of the Mosaic Law and the role it plays in salvation history. The reason this is an important task is that the New Testament uses the Mosaic Law as one of the primary stones upon which to sharpen people's understanding of the gospel. Tell me what you believe about the Mosaic Law and I will tell you what type of Gospel you live for! When we debate the role of the Mosaic Law we are debating the Gospel which is necessarily related. Living by faith and the Spirit of love is very different from the way of Law.

As we contemplate the possibility that the Mosaic Law was a temporary dispensation that stands in opposition to the freedom and love of the Gospel, the temptation is to cry 'antinomian' and insist that rejecting the Mosaic Law is licence for ungodliness. The temptation is to say to Paul the same thing many said when they first heard reports of his preaching, "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just." (Romans 3:8) But are we correct to assume that our modern equivalents of 'law keeping religion' will produce the godliness God demands? God seeks an inner work of the heart by His Spirit. God seeks people who will worship Him in Spirit and truth, people who will have the humble heart that trembles at God and rejoices in his love. Is it possible that our programs for godliness fall far short of this inner work and are not only weaker than the Gospel, but opposed to it?

The epistle to the Galatians was written to rebuke a church that had a wrong view of the Law. Paul saw wrong views of the Mosaic Law as being a Gospel issue over which a person could lose their salvation. The Galatians wanted to keep a little bit of the Mosaic Law- surely to keep the circumcision law could not be such a serious issue?

Galatians 5:2-4

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

It was a serious error. Keeping that one part of the Law raised the danger of being severed from Christ. The question for us is this- In light of our views of the Mosaic Law, would God have Paul urgently preach Galatians to us again today?

Appendix

False Avenues

The conclusions of this paper on the Law are rarely reached by Christians because a number of alternative explanations are accepted as solving the problem of Law in the Bible. Often a muddle of the below 'false avenues' are held simultaneously and serve to make it difficult to critique the assumptions we use to interpret Bible passages. This appendix aims only to highlight some of the alternative approaches to Law that make it difficult to accept the position presented in the above paper. While this is not intended to be a scholarly presentation of the positions or a detailed refutation of them, it is hoped that mentioning some additional issues will help readers work assess the cogency of the argument presented in the main paper.

There are seven common 'false avenues' used in attempts to handle the Bible's teaching on Law-

1. Unclear definition of Law

The word 'Law' in the Scriptures does have a variety of meanings, sometimes it can be used as shorthand for the first five books of the Old Testament (e.g. Lk.24:44), sometimes it can be used to mean a principle (e.g. Rom.7:21) and sometimes it can refer to a prophecy somewhere in the Old Testament other than the first five books (e.g. Jn.15:25). As a result of this diversity of usage of the word 'law' it is often the case that people fail to see that there is a use of the word that is overwhelmingly the most common and most significant one.

Despite a small number of exceptions, the word 'Law' in the Bible almost always refers to the body of regulations given to Moses at Sinai for the governance of the nation Israel. The 'Law' is the Mosaic Law and is recorded in Exodus 20ff, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In all of these there are various narrative sections that are not actually 'Law'- the Law properly speaking appears to consist of two things- Firstly, commandments that require obedience and secondly, Curses or Blessings that God promises to bring upon Israel in light of their success in the former. These Curses and Blessings are recorded in Lev. 26 and Deut.27-30. The exact nature of these curses is important and will be discussed below. For now it suffices to say that unless we see that there is a clear normal definition of Law (with a small number of related exceptions) we will fail to see the clarity and shock of the arguments in the Bible which make use of the word 'Law'. If a reader assumes that 'Law' usually means something other than these regulations and curses/blessings then wrong avenues will inevitably be taken.

It is usual for Bible readers to minimise the importance of this normal legal delineation of the Mosaic Law for at least two reasons, firstly we want to simplify things to aid communication and secondly we miss the concrete historical context of Judaism that pervades the entire Christian Bible.

We need to be clear that the Mosaic Law is the body of regulations demanding obedience and the curses/blessings God promised to bring on Israel in light of their keeping of the regulations. This means that the teaching in the above paper is not at all claiming that the commandments in the New Testament are obsolete- the paper is about the Mosaic Law, not every imperative in the Bible! Indeed, it was the commandments of Paul to not submit to the Mosaic Law that initially prompted the author's study of this topic.

2. Superficiality

This is not an avenue one would rush to knowingly or willingly. However a number of factors contribute to make superficiality a real problem when trying to grasp the significance of the Mosaic Law in the Bible.

Firstly our culture militates against precision, complexity and subtlety in reading. We are a culture that thrives on the instant and the visual. This means that resisting the temptation to superficiality in reading is very much swimming against the tide of our culture.

Secondly our grasp of the Gospel can lead us to superficiality in Bible reading. Having believed that Jesus died for us and recognised that even a child can grasp the Gospel, we can wrongly conclude that this means the Scriptures themselves are simple and easily understood. The large selection of quotations about the Law above should remind us that while the Gospel is simple, the Bible is a collection of books that interconnect in many ways and flow into a story rich with depth and meaning. Each book has a unique contribution to the Bible story and makes its point using many kinds of genre and literary technique. It is sadly not uncommon for Christians to grasp the simplicity of the Gospel and then fail to see the complexity of the Bible story.

Thirdly our sinfulness means we will always find it difficult to challenge our fondly held views and admit we have been in error. A superficial grasp of a topic feeds our sinful resistance to growth because it reassures us that we have already understood and stops us reading the text too closely, in case we might be challenged.

One way this superficiality can play out is in the belief that there is one verse in the Bible that solves all our problems and gives a definitive view on the Mosaic Law. For example many people point to Mat.5:17-20 and conclude that Jesus taught the Law would never be abolished, he just came to fulfil it. At first glance this is what Jesus says- but to guard against superficial sweeping conclusions we should ask ourselves a few questions such as, 'What effect on the Law's function would fulfilment have?' 'In what sense did Jesus expect people to be more righteous than the law doers of v20?' 'In what sense did Jesus mean he would not abolish the Law?' 'How would our conclusions fit with Paul's teaching that Jesus did abolish the Law e.g. Eph.2:15?' As we study the Scriptures we must be on our guard against a spirit of superficiality that would hold us back from plumbing the depths of what God has to say to us.

3. Threefold Division of Law

It is common to divide the Law into regulations pertaining to ceremonies, government and ethics. The way the Mosaic Law functions after Christ's first coming is then assumed to be that the ceremonies and government parts no longer apply to believers, but the moral does. So for example a Christian no longer has to offer goats for sacrifice at the Temple

(ceremonial), but he does have to seek to obey the eighth commandment against stealing (ethical).

This solution to the problem has been adopted by many in whole or part, but it is deeply flawed. Firstly nowhere in Scripture do we find the Law treated in this threefold way; on the contrary the Scriptures appear to view the Mosaic Law as a single undividable entity. Secondly, If one does try to divide the Law in this way the question of what exactly goes into each division is impossible to settle- e.g. Is the Sabbath Law Government, Ceremony or Ethics? It could be any of them, and even if the question could be settled, should you keep the whole section of Sabbath laws that include a Sabbath rest for the agricultural properties and release of slaves on regular years? Thirdly, if a Christian is to obey a moral part of the Mosaic Law this would be contrary to the New Testament insistence that obedience to Law is the opposite of faith in Jesus and the work of the Spirit. Finally, it is difficult to see how Jesus could fulfil only these two parts of the Law and not a moral part- he lived the perfect ethical life under Law on our behalf. In short the threefold division of Law is not possible, there is no evidence for it being an acceptable solution in Scripture and it contradicts New Testament teaching on how the Christian life is to be lived.

4. Legalism

Christians rightly want to live lives that please God, and realise that inner motivations are an important part of this. Unfortunately in our desire to live well we can wander up the false avenue of imagining that the New Testament speaks about something called 'legalism'. Legalism means using rules or the Law in a way that is flowing from wrong motivations and is thus unhelpful to the Christian. This idea of legalism is often used to explain how a Christian ought to relate to the Mosaic Law. Thus it is suggested that a believer ought to use the Law to help in Christian living- just not in a legalistic manner. The assumption is two fold, firstly it is assumed that there is a right motivation with which one can obey the Law, and secondly it is assumed that the New Testament talks about this problem of legalism.

The problem with this wrong avenue is that the Bible does not seem to be aware of our modern idea of legalism. We need to read it into the text to find it. This is seen most clearly in the argument of Galatians where Paul is often said to be arguing against Judaisers who wanted to use bits of the law in a legalistic manner. However if the argument is followed through it will be seen that Paul does not argue that the Judaisers use the Law with a wrong motivation and they ought to use it with a right motivation- he argues against the use of the Law itself! The New Testament does not appear to argue against the use of Law with a wrong motivation, it appears to argue against the use of the Law after it has been fulfilled in Jesus.

5. Law regulating society today

Some Christians argue that the entirety of the Mosaic Law should be used to guide life today, including the way our nations should be governed. This view is rare in the UK but quite common in parts of American Christianity where many people see the restoration of a physical nation of Israel as part of the way God will fulfil his plan of salvation. In light of the New Testament and in particular Hebrews, it is very difficult to defend the idea that all of the Law continues to be in force for any modern nation state. This approach would seem to be a wrong avenue without Scriptural support.

6. Law as Model of Gospel

A similarity in the pattern of the Old Testament and New Testament plots has been utilised in explaining the way a Christian should view the Mosaic Law. The argument goes something like this- In the Old Testament, Israel were rescued out of slavery in Egypt and given the Law after they had been rescued to show them the shape of the way they were to live as rescued people. Similarly in the New Testament we find that God's people are rescued by Jesus and set free from slavery to sin to live lives of worship.

This appears to be a fair thing to say, but there are real problems with it as an explanation of how a Christian should relate to the Mosaic Law. Firstly it does not actually explain how a Christian should relate to the commandments of the Law- for this reason it is usually combined with aspects of the other wrong avenues outlined in this section. Secondly this explanation fails to take seriously the way in which the New Testament sets the Gospel against the Law as two very different and incompatible ways of relating to God. Thirdly the observation of a pattern in Scripture does not necessarily mean that this pattern is used in the Bible to explain the way a Christian should live or relate to the Mosaic Law.

While the basic pattern of rescue to changed life is present in both the Old and New Testaments, we are heading up a wrong avenue if we use this to suggest that the Law is in some way a model of the Gospel life.

7. Relevant only for Conversion

Sometimes Christians think that the discussion on how we relate to the Law is solved by saying that the arguments of the New Testament against the Law are primarily directed towards people who are in the process of becoming Christians. It is argued that we should not seek to do good works or obey the Law to bring us close to God but should simply trust Jesus for salvation. And once we are saved the Spirit will help us obey the Law as Christians. Various slogans are used to popularise this view, e.g. 'We are not saved by good works, but we are saved for good works' e.g. 'Saved by grace for obedience, but not saved by obedience'.

This approach is a wrong avenue for many reasons. Firstly the way a person is converted is the way they continue to live as Christians. The Bible does not draw a substantive distinction between evangelising people who are unconverted and evangelising people who are converted. Secondly, the question of precisely what a person ought to obey is not made clear. Should they obey all of the Mosaic Law or only the so called moral part? Thirdly, the work of the Spirit is not explained in the New Testament as being to help us obey parts of the Law; his work is something much deeper and more powerful than merely motivating us to obey the very thing Jesus died to rescue us from.

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