

**PT MEDIA** PAPER *Number 3*

# THE LAW OF PROMISE

William J U Philip

The Law of God, rightly understood, is an integral part of the gospel: not opposed to grace, but witnessing to grace, and working in the hands of grace, to bring glory to God through his people.

*Number 3*

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The Law  
as it functions  
within the  
world of  
God's grace

**The Law of Promise**

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**In preaching and teaching the Scriptures, many of us find ourselves rather hesitant when it comes to preaching from the Old Testament Law. Because we are committed to a gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ, and because in Paul's writings we find an unremitting and vigorous defence of the salvation that is 'by faith in Jesus Christ' alone and not 'by works of law' (*Galatians 2:15ff*), we are naturally wary of being found to be turning people away from grace and towards a works-based salvation. Rightly so! God forbid that we should so 'distort the gospel of Christ' and put ourselves under the curse of the apostle (*Galatians 1:8-9*).**

But of course rejecting 'works of law' as of any value for salvation is not at all the same as rejecting the law of God itself. This Paul will not do. Rather, he happily affirms 'I agree with the law, that it is good' (*Romans 7:16*), and moreover he both 'delights in it' and 'serves it' in his inner being, his transformed and renewed Christian mind (*Romans 7:22,25*). That is why in the epistles, where he so extravagantly unfolds the indicatives of grace in the gospel, he also, and without any embarrassment, expounds the many and varied imperatives, or law-commands, which flow out of that grace and give expression to its reality in the lives of believing and transformed people. This unperturbed juxtaposition of God's grace and his law in Paul's New Testament gospel theology ought to alert us to beware of any imbalance in our own thinking or preaching which, for fear of adding to the gospel of God, actually subtracts from it. The law of God, rightly understood, is an integral part of the gospel. It is not opposed to grace, but both witnesses to grace and works in the hands of grace to bring glory to God, and to work glory in his people.

So we need God's law, and we must teach it, including the teaching of the Old Testament Law<sup>1</sup>, or Torah, that we find in the Pentateuch –

<sup>1</sup> One of the chief causes of confusion in understanding Paul's statements about 'law' is failure to recognise that he uses this term in many different ways, to refer to different ➤

which Paul tells us is written ‘for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Corinthians 10:11). But to do so we must have clear in our minds at least some sense of the nature and place of the Law as it functions within the world of grace that God’s people inhabit. In teaching a course on Deuteronomy at the *Cornhill Training Course* recently I have been pondering these issues, and was persuaded that it would be useful to put together some thoughts in print as a PT Media Paper. I am saying nothing new at all, but in trying to express these things in a somewhat fresh way, I hope it may prove of help to others, particularly in teaching the Law of God.

One difficulty Christians have in understanding the nature and place of the law of God, leading them to have an erroneously negative view of it, is that they think of it too impersonally. In our western culture in particular, we see law as an impersonal force, an arm of the state which threatens sanctions upon individuals who transgress ‘it’. But in Scripture, the law is never separated from the lawgiver, nor from the context of *relationship* with the lawgiver, a relationship of covenant love. All ‘law’ (in the sense of imperative, or command) is the personal, relational obedience required in response to the *prior grace* of the covenant God, the grace made known abundantly throughout the Law, or Torah, itself.

It is clear that the Law, in the form of the Mosaic covenant (the Decalogue plus its exposition and application for life in the land of Israel), is given at Sinai to a people already redeemed. This pattern, of God’s law functioning *within* a sovereignly created relationship, is a consistent one throughout Scripture. So it has been at every stage of the history of redemption, from the first glimmerings of the promise given

concepts, often within the same argument or passage of Scripture. ‘Law’ can refer to the Torah, or Pentateuch, or the Mosaic covenant, or the decalogue, or ceremonies of the Law, as well as to the larger concept of God’s complete and comprehensive holy requirement of humanity. It also can connote the idea of law in the abstract, as a principle, and even at times refers to a personal force that has dominion over the sinner. Here I use the capitalised ‘Law’ to refer to the Old Testament Law, whereas the lower case use refers to ‘law’ in the more general sense.

to Adam; so it remains in the new covenant inaugurated in Jesus Christ, and shall be until the final consummation overtakes us in the coming of Christ in glory to establish his kingdom forever. What God himself has done always precedes what he may demand. Grace and promise always go before law and response.

## **GOD’S LAW DISPLAYS THE RIGHT RESPONSE TO A COVENANT GOD**

God reveals himself, and the result of this revelation is that he requires response to it. Scripture itself recognises this primary function of revelation very clearly throughout, and it is classically expressed in Moses’ words towards the end of his great oration to all Israel on the plains of Moab:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things *revealed* belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.  
*Deuteronomy 29:29*

We might ask, *why?* Why should revelation necessitate action – *doing* – as opposed to mere speculation? The answer lies in the nature of God himself. Yahweh is the God who makes himself known in *covenant*. This is the very essence of the God who makes himself known. He can only be truly known in covenant, because he is Yahweh, the *Covenant God*. To know him, therefore, means to be in relationship with him, because that is the kind of God he is, not any other. And to be in relationship with him means to be under his lordship, in obedience to his covenant demands. To know ‘about him’ is not to ‘know him’; to know him means to *love him* with heart and soul and strength, in *total obedience* to his revealed personal word. Not surprisingly, then, we find our Lord echoing this clearly in his own teaching:

My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.  
*Luke 8:21*<sup>2</sup>

### The nature of the God who reveals himself

Covenant relationship is at the very heart of the revelation of God, because, ultimately, relationship is at the very heart of God's being; he is Trinity. The medium of his self-revelation is vitally connected to the content he is revealing: his very self. There has never been any true revelation of God outside the context of covenant. There is no other revelation of God outside a real relationship with him, because his very self revelation is covenantal and both *requires and creates* relationship.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it follows that there can be no 'bare revelation' of this God. He reveals himself in real time and history, in a real place, to a real people. His self revelation is always 'in the flesh'. The word that reveals *can* reveal because it *creates the relationship of knowing*. It is the word that is itself 'the power of God for salvation' (*Romans 1:16*).

It is absolutely vital to grasp the fact that all revelation of God – his gracious, saving self-revelation – is bound up with demands and responsibilities. Conversely, all demands God makes – all his laws, commands, requirements of his people – are bound up with the privileges of relationship in covenant. The 'things revealed' are in order 'that we may do', yet the doing can only be real if born out of the prior revelation of grace. This absolute priority of grace over the obedience of faith is the great distinctive of the true biblical religion.

Right back at the beginning of creation, Adam receives God's requirements of him, his 'law' – but receives it in a perfect heart of

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, *Luke 11:28* 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it', cf *Matthew 7:24-27*. It is worth noting this consistent pattern in the New Testament that equates *obedience* to the word of God's command and summons – whether in Scripture (eg *Luke 16:31*) or on Jesus own lips (*John 6:63*) – with repentance and faith, new birth, and reception of the Spirit. The interchangeable use of these terms is particularly clear in Acts. In *5:32* for example, *Spirit baptism* is synonymous with *obedience* and obedience inseparable from *faith* (6:7), and in *Acts 10-11* reception of the Spirit is synonymous with receiving the word of God (10:45; 11:1), and with repentance unto life (11:18). To know God is to love him, and to love him is to obey him. This is what real belief means. (*I John 2:3-6, 29; 3:23-24; 5:3ff*). 'Faith is properly that by which we obey the gospel' (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 1:5*, Editors. DW & TFTorrance, [Edinburgh, 1960], 18).

<sup>3</sup> For a helpful discussion along these lines, see Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, (IVP, 2002).

flesh. Man is created in relationship (creation itself is a work of grace that creates all things in perfect relationship to God) and the only appropriate response to that generative grace is for him to live in harmonious expression of God's holy law. It is important that we should focus not only on the privative command, about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but rather note that the overall response required is overwhelmingly positive. Mankind is to worship God alone, that is, by 'imaging' their maker, whose image they are (cf *Commands 1-3 of the Decalogue*). They are to work and rest according to the divine pattern (cf 4th), to live in right relationship to family, animals and the whole earth, together filling the earth, ruling over it, and so make the whole cosmos like the garden of God (cf *commands 5-9*). Doing so they shall live, enjoy fellowship with God and his creation and radiate God's image in it, as his Son, forever.

The only negative is the command not to eat the fruit of one particular tree; ie do not covet that which *alone* God forbids (cf 10th). The seeming arbitrariness of the command about this particular tree, which is marked out as special purely by God's word to man, indicates the heart of what is at stake. The message is 'let your heart obey him for the sake of obedience alone, for the sake of pure, gratuitous obedience to his word, just because it is his word.'<sup>4</sup> 'For man the apparent immediate advantage (the acquisition of knowledge) must be subordinated to the 'real' good of doing the declared will of God. The Bible never deviates from this basic position. Humankind is designed for obedience to what God reveals.'<sup>5</sup> This obedience, this submission to the divine lordship, was the key to ongoing enjoyment of the perfect and bountiful creation relationship, with all its infinite potentiality.

<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the emphasis of not only the Decalogue, but the *New Testament's* ethical imperatives directing life in response to the gospel, is expressed in precisely these terms of *right relationships*—living in right relationship to God, family, work and society and nature. The accomplishment of God's redemptive purpose goes far beyond the mere personal salvation of individual sinners; it is directed towards the recreation (and indeed the consummation) of the whole creational covenantal order in his everlasting kingdom, the new heavens and earth.

<sup>5</sup> Alec Motyer, *Look To The Rock* (IVP, 1996), 73-74.

### Relational response can only occur in a relationship

But once the relationship is broken and destroyed by sin, the ‘proper’ context of the covenantal response of law-keeping is lost. Such a response was still required of mankind (God had not changed, nor his proper ordering of universal relationships), but no longer possible, because the relationship is broken. What we call ‘the fall’, Scripture speaks of in terms of Adam’s ‘transgression’ of the covenant which brought about a catastrophic ‘one-for-all’ rupture of divine-human relationship (*Hosea 6:7; Romans 5:14-17*). Mankind is changed forever; man has lost his heart of flesh with its perfect reception and knowledge of God’s sovereign will, and is ejected from the realm of unspoiled ongoing fellowship with God. This ‘trespass’, this tragic breach of the perfect covenant order, ‘led to condemnation for all men’ (*Romans 5:18*).

The memory of the law written in flesh by creation is still there; man is not utterly dehumanised by his rebellion. But man as the perfect image of the covenant lawgiver is vitiated and no longer pure, and therefore his flawless knowledge of God’s law, the perfect will of the creator, has also become clouded. All men thus know God’s law instinctively to a degree (their conscience bearing witness, *Romans 2:14ff*), so that all are still responsible for their disobedience to God the sovereign Lord. But without the original great privilege of direct and specific ongoing revelation through unbroken communion with God, which alone is the very bread of life, they are helpless to respond as they ought, even if they wanted to, because by very nature they have decisively been ‘made sinners’ (*Romans 5:19*).

The law, then, becomes for sinful man a great burden, and a curse: man may try to keep it (as he is bound to do) yet he is unable to do so. It can only condemn him because he cannot offer it as the response to grace within relationship as it is meant to be. Hence death reigned from Adam to Moses (*Romans 5:14*), long before the ‘Law’ in the form of the Mosaic covenant was given, because God’s law, in the most elemental sense of his righteous covenant requirements, had been transgressed. The covenant was broken, and proper response within covenant was rendered impossible by sin.

The situation may be likened to the place of intercourse within

marriage. (Indeed, as Scripture makes clear, marriage itself is given to mankind in order to function as a living illustration before our eyes of the greater reality to which it points, namely God’s covenant relationship with his people: cf *Ephesians 5:32*). Sexual intercourse within marriage expresses appropriately the relationship that already exists, and as such is a joy and a delight. But destroy the marriage, so as it is irretrievably damaged by adultery, and the partners at once become estranged. Now, the very thought of such sexual union becomes anathema, a horror, we might even say a ‘curse’. Still more derisory is the idea of the guilty partner trying to resurrect the marriage relationship through offering frequent sexual intercourse, as a means to repairing the damage. Nothing can repair the damage – except true repentance and forgiveness on the part of the wronged partner, if indeed they can ever bring themselves to forgive. If this is possible, it is this – and this alone – that will re-create the relationship, and only then can sexual intercourse once again express the appropriate response. Only then will this right and appropriate response become again the most precious expression of that union, and the most joyful, happy and willing response, which can again begin to foster the growth of that relationship as it was always meant to do.

So it is with the law of God. What was once a delight, becomes a curse (*Galatians 3:10*), and can become a delight again only through restoration to the covenant relationship by an act of God’s sovereign redeeming grace. This is, of course, the privilege of God’s chosen people, who by grace, and through his promise of redemption fulfilled in Jesus Christ, are called to the obedience of faith.

With this in mind, we can consider three important things about the law of God as revealed in the Mosaic administration.

#### 1 The Law is primarily given for the life of holiness

Failure to understand covenant life as the context of both God’s grace and his law, will lead to confusion over the role of God’s law, both in its original setting prior to Jesus coming, and in the eschatological age of fulfilment now inaugurated through Christ’s finished work, and sealed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with his ascension to glory. This is

why some (including dispensationalists, and others who essentially share this view on the place of the law, if not on matters of eschatology) are so mistaken on the law; they give insufficient consideration to the nature of covenant as a principal category in biblical theology. But the Scripture makes clear at every stage that it is within the context of a covenant relationship, brought into being through the sovereign word of God's grace, that the privilege of God's law is granted as a means of response and obedience, and the vehicle of relationship. Real knowledge of God's law is the fruit of his gracious salvation, never the cause of it; its primary sphere is that of the life of holiness, not the means of justification.

We must never separate God's *grace* from his covenant; to do so leads to antinomianism: 'let us sin, so grace abounds' (the attitude Paul condemns in *Romans* 6). Nor must we ever separate God's *law* from his covenant; to do this is what leads to legalism, and seeking to be justified by 'works of law' (the attitude Paul condemns in *Galatians*, especially 2:15ff). It is this great biblical category of *covenant relationship* which brings together God's prior grace and human response in the proper way, and enables us to make sense of what is a coherent pattern throughout the history of redemption.

Thus Adam is the recipient of gracious divine revelation in *Genesis* 3:15, the first great gospel promise of redemption. Noah finds this same grace 'in the eyes of the Lord' as his righteousness (*Genesis* 6:8).<sup>6</sup> Abraham, too, being chosen in gracious covenant love, is given the privilege of receiving this gracious, direct revelation of God, and called to respond to God's grace by living in his righteousness. God says of Abraham, 'I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to *keep the way of the Lord* by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him' (*Genesis* 18:19). Grace brings relationship into being, so

<sup>6</sup> Translated 'favour' in the NIV, but the Hebrew word חֵן (*hen*), means grace. It is thus translated in the LXX as χάρις (*charis*), the common New Testament term for grace. The formula 'finding grace/favour in the eyes of...' occurs some forty times in the Old Testament. According to Alec Motyer 'it is a formula which safeguards the pure understanding of "grace" as the outreaching of free, unmerited favour.' *Look to The Rock*, 43.

that the required response to God can be expressed, by 'keeping the way of the Lord' (ie his law).

At Sinai, of course, there is a great leap forward in salvation history, and we see even more vividly how God's covenant demands follow the action of his electing grace. The law at Sinai is given to an already redeemed people (*Exodus* 20:2ff). After the great constitutive redemption of his people from Egypt in the Exodus, now this chosen people are given a new and a greater revelation of God. They alone, of all the peoples of the earth, are given the knowledge of God's holy law in such a way as to have its clarity before them in a hitherto unprecedented way. Though death reigned from the time of Adam to Moses because of sin (because God's holy requirements were clearly unmet in fallen man) now we see a far greater, clearer, fuller revelation of 'the way of the Lord' to this privileged people, in the form of a detailed exposition, spoken by God, and written down by Moses for the people. Clearly, if the most important thing in life is to live according to what pleases God, ignorance of what pleases him is not bliss, but the greatest disadvantage. Conversely, a pure knowledge of what he desires is the highest blessing (cf *Ephesians* 5:10). It is this great blessing and privilege Israel received at Sinai, not because of their righteousness or surpassing obedience (*Deuteronomy* 9:4,5,6) but because they were a people chosen to be holy to the Lord, as his treasured possession (*Deuteronomy* 7:6; 26:18-19).

The law's primary context, then, is that of sanctification not justification. It is given that redeemed, beloved, covenant people may *live so as to please God*, and therefore enjoy the blessings of the life of obedient faith to the full as they respond to his grace – the only right and fitting response in this relationship of reconciliation. Having been brought into gracious covenant relationship with God, Israel as a holy people are given greater privileges than the covenant family had ever had before, greater even than Abraham had ever possessed. That which lies eternally at the very heart of heaven itself was made known to them. The perfection of God's covenant requirements – 'the covenant' itself, as *Deuteronomy* 4:13 calls the *Decalogue* – was revealed to them by God's own voice, written with his own finger in stone, and given to them to have always before them. The law is a flawless image of God himself, a perfect

‘preceptual replica of the divine nature’<sup>7</sup>. That is why these tablets alone were placed in the Ark of the Covenant, and placed at the centre of the tabernacle, the visible representation on earth of the eternal reality of heaven itself (Exodus 26:30; Hebrews 8:5). This represented most powerfully the eternal, unchangeable word of the living God, which remained in their midst, and would abide with them wherever they went. Extraordinary privilege indeed.

## 2 The Law is promissory

Was this, then, at Sinai law-giving (about works) or promise giving (about gospel)? The answer is that it was both, because it was covenant giving, and covenant always contains law in response to promise. But the order of the revelation spoken at Sinai (made increasingly clear throughout the detailed Mosaic exposition of the covenant, particularly in Deuteronomy) was promise first. All law-keeping was to be seen as the appropriate response in the light of the grace of all God’s promises: promises old, as recalled from the past, and promises new, as revealed through God to Moses.

What does God say in the Mosaic revelation? He says, essentially, and repeatedly, ‘I am the Lord who has redeemed you. And you, my chosen people, shall be like me!’ It is not primarily a case of ‘because I have redeemed you, you must be like me.’ Again and again simple indicative statements are made which promise that Israel shall be a people holy to Yahweh the only God, as he has promised (cf Deuteronomy 26:18-19 for one strikingly clear example<sup>8</sup>). You shall not have any other God, or idols, etc ... You shall honour parents, you shall not be murderers, idolaters,

<sup>7</sup> Motyer, *Look To The Rock*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Some translations fail to bring out the full force of the clear indicative nature of these statements. The ESV renders v17 and 19 quite well, though still weakens v18. It should read ‘and the LORD has declared you this day to be a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, to keep all his commandments.’ Throughout, the Hebrew text indicates simple indicative sense. (The constructions to be a people and to keep all his commandments are identical, the verbs in the infinitive construct with ל prefix denoting the end or purpose of an action.) The LXX similarly renders these verses with this sense. The New Testament, of course, explicitly confirms this definite end purpose in election, (Ephesians 1:4; 2:10, 1 Peter 1:2).

thieves, liars, coveters. This is not the vain wish of a god who is hoping for the best, but doubts whether he can really accomplish anything much; it is the promise of a future reality, from the LORD who alone is God in heaven above and earth beneath, whose promises never fail or fall to the ground. The people of this holy God shall be holy. How can he be ultimately satisfied with anything else? This is the great eternal purpose of his electing grace in Christ (Ephesians 1:4,11; 2:10). The people, the bride of Christ the eternal Son of God, shall be presented to him in splendour, ‘without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (Ephesians 5:27). This is, and always has been, the ultimate purpose of God.

This is what Jeremiah 31:33ff picks up and points forward to with even greater clarity when he speaks of the great defining blessing of the New Covenant as being that the law will be written in the heart, in flesh, so that it will be obeyed perfectly. But that promise is clearly present already throughout the Mosaic administration. The prophets (as is true of so much of their ministry) are picking up and expounding the covenant promises of the Torah. This is sheer, unconditional promise. It is a promise with an eschatological fulfilment in view right from the beginning, something that is especially prominent in Deuteronomy’s great emphasis on the distant future of restoration and consummation involving all nations along with Israel (Deuteronomy 4:27ff; chapters 32-33). God is going to make his redeemed people like him; nothing will stand in his way, and indeed the sin and failure of Israel as a nation will in the end, through the deep and unfathomable mysteries of the divine grace, only serve to magnify the scope of his redemptive purposes such that the glory of the latter end will surpass utterly even the grandest expectations of the first promises.

## Live now in the light of the ultimate certain reality

Just as in the New Testament, where the imperative for godly living now comes from the indicative of the grace of the gospel – the fact that God shall make us like him, chosen to be blameless and holy, glorified forever – so in Deuteronomy’s great exposition of the Mosaic covenant, all the imperatives and laws that follow are founded on this great covenant

promise. After the great unique divine revelation, to which 'he added no more' (Deuteronomy 5:22) God tells Moses to write down all the laws and commands that tell these people how to live in the *here and now*, in this land he is giving them (Deuteronomy 5:31). Throughout Deuteronomy, it is clear that the imperatives (the conditional aspects of covenant keeping upon which present blessings depend) are hedged in by the sheer promises of grace that God will, in the end, and definitively, act to bring about his promise of decisive holiness (the unconditional aspect of his covenant, the 'everlasting arms' that lie beneath and beyond everything<sup>9</sup>).

Despite all the 'decrees and laws'<sup>10</sup> demanding a righteous life of covenantal response to grace, which was always to be *heart* obedience, never just an outward conformity to rituals (see Deuteronomy 10:16 on circumcision of the heart, cf Romans 2:28-29), there is always the realisation that the flesh is weak, and the people would transgress and fall under judgement. Consequently, there is always clear recognition that the only hope for them lay in the substance of this unconditional future promise of God, that he would himself bring about the true circumcision in heart which they needed (30:6ff). We misunderstand the whole message of the Torah (the Law) unless we grasp this: the command to obedience rested solely on the basis of this promise. The only way to live now was by *faith* in that promise, responding *now* in faithful obedience on the basis of that future promised reality.

This was the great privilege of being an Israelite, as Paul points out in his letter to the Romans: not that they were less sinful than the pagan Gentiles all around<sup>11</sup>, but that they were 'entrusted with the very words of God' (Romans 3:2). In the Law they had the word of God's saving promise to deal with their sin. Until at last the promised Christ would

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 33:27

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 4:1. Repeatedly throughout Deuteronomy, the **הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים** (huqim and mishpatim) represent the many particular laws and statutes which give practical expression to a wholehearted obedience to **כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת** (kol hamitsvah), the 'whole commandment' of the covenant that is fundamental loyalty to the lordship of Yahweh alone (6:1, 25; 7:11; 8:1; 11:8; 15:5; 17:20; 19:9; 26:13; 27:1; 30:11).

<sup>11</sup> Far from it, as Deuteronomy 9:4, 6, 13ff makes abundantly clear.

come they, of all the peoples of the earth, through the sheer undeserved election of God, had the privilege of such a gracious guardianship in order that they 'might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:24). Such a trusting submission to divine lordship was not beyond their reach, as it was for some. The gospel word was *near* them, in their heart and mouth so they could obey it by faith, and live (Deuteronomy 30:11-16). Paul affirms this with startling clarity in Romans 10:6-8, when he says that we, as ministers of the new covenant, are preaching this *same* gospel word. He identifies this 'word' (the 'commandment'<sup>12</sup> of Deuteronomy 30:11-14) as the very same 'word of faith' offered in his own gospel of promise, the gospel which now summons all nations to salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Indeed the whole argument in Romans, Paul's great missionary exposition, is that the privilege of God's saving covenant, revealed 'to the Jew first', now comes, with all its proffered grace and its summons to the 'obedience of faith', 'also to the Greek' (Romans 1:16).<sup>13</sup> That which was once tied to Israel as a nation within its land (though never exclusively ethnocentric in nature<sup>14</sup>), is now at last extended extravagantly to the ends of the earth, as it was always purposed to do 'when the fullness of time had come'. His gospel is this same gospel, 'promised beforehand', but it is now brought to its surpassing fulfilment in the manifestation of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, ascended and coming in glory. Now the borders of the great Israel of God encompass the whole world, to the very ends of the earth. Even the slaves in Rome are 'called to belong' to Jesus Christ 'according to the command of the eternal God' (Romans 1:7; 16:26).

This brings us naturally to a third, and very important consideration.

<sup>12</sup> See note 10 above 'the (whole) commandment'.

<sup>13</sup> The message of Romans is enclosed in 1:5 and 16:26 by the great scope and purpose of redemption, now fully revealed in Paul's gospel: bringing about the obedience of faith among all the nations, for the glory of God's great name.

<sup>14</sup> As witnessed by the many recorded examples of foreigners and aliens who were incorporated in to God's Israel by throwing their trust on the covenant God, some of them even becoming part of the ancestral line of Christ himself.



### 3 The law is anticipatory of something greater

The Israelites at Sinai received this extraordinary privilege of a wonderful revelation of God's great covenant, the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 4:12-13). This is placed in the holy of holies (Deuteronomy 10:1-6) the earthly representation of heaven itself (Exodus 25:9; 26:30; Hebrews 8:5), indicating that this covenant reveals what has lain at the heart of heaven itself, throughout eternity (Hebrews 13:20).<sup>15</sup> So Israel had, from the heart of heaven, by the very mouth of God himself, a revelation of the eternal covenant, the law of God. Then, after God himself had 'added no more' they had the further great privilege of being given comprehensive and detailed instruction about everything 'that pleases the Lord' (cf Ephesians 5:10), so they might respond in every sphere of life to this gracious revelation, and truly be a people holy to his Name in the eyes of the world.

This further instruction can be viewed broadly from two perspectives. On the one hand is an exposition of the wide-ranging covenant responsibilities laid upon the people, in terms of reflecting God's holiness in the realm of both the personal and the societal. This is principally elaborated directly after the giving of the Decalogue in Exodus 21-23<sup>16</sup>, and then expanded and applied comprehensively as the people are on the brink of entering the land, in the renewal of the

<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that the relation of the old covenant to the new is not a purely evolutionary one. To the author of Hebrews, the 'shadows' in the old covenant are not so much shadows of something that comes after, but of something that lies transcendentally above, something eternal. The law is a *shadow* of the good things of the world still to come (Hebrews 10:1); the new covenant is the true *image* of these realities, but the reality itself is the eternal, celestial reality, still fully to come. Geerhardus Vos helpfully illustrates this by likening the old covenant to the artist's sketch. It is a prophecy of the finished painting in colour, but precisely so because it is first the projection of the actual reality in the artist's mind on to the sketch pad. Moses thus gave, in the law, a sketch in charcoal; yet it is a sketch not just of the coming glorious colour of Jesus Christ in history, but a sketch of the transcendent eternal glory of what was revealed to him on the Mountain from heaven itself. See his 'Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke', in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: the shorter writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Editor RB Gaffin, (P&R, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> These chapters are often referred to as 'the book of the covenant'.

covenant at Moab recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. On the other hand, and immediately following on from the exposition of the life of holiness in Exodus, is the recognition that even the most willing hearts and souls, though faithful and obedient in response to such a great redemption, are still frail flesh, and cannot be spotless and without sin. So there is the wonderful and merciful provision of forgiveness, through atoning sacrifice, which alone allows the continuing fellowship of a redeemed, but sin-stained, people with the holy God in their midst. This whole raft of cultic legislation surrounding the Tabernacle, with all its requirements of priests, sacrifices, ritual and symbolism, takes up the rest of Exodus after the covenant ratification in chapter 24, and continues throughout the whole book of Leviticus. All of this together constituted and expounded the law of Moses – the Mosaic covenant law mediated through him, and given for the life in the land. It spoke of redemption and release from slavery, of faith and obedience, of forgiveness and atonement for sin, of holiness and of the promise of ongoing fellowship with the covenant God. How then could such a revelation ever be superseded? What could ever be greater than this? It is hard to imagine such a thing possible.

Indeed this revelation was never superseded throughout Israel's long history. No-one had ever seen more than this revelation of the very heart of God. It was the character of God himself, revealed with extraordinary clarity, and chiselled out on stone tablets to be a perpetual witness before them. But despite the magnitude of the revelation of the covenant at Sinai, we are told that though they heard his voice, they 'saw no form' (Deuteronomy 4:12). Glorious it was; but when Jesus appeared, even this revelation was surpassed in glory. For when he appeared, at last, men heard not only the voice, and had not only the inscription on stone, but they saw his form, in flesh. For the Word, in all its senses, including the word of righteousness embodying all God's holiness and righteousness (his law), *became flesh*. Men did not just hear of his radiance and glory, his grace and truth; 'we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). He who was the very heart of the eternal covenant, he who was at the heart of the tabernacle – because he was eternally at the heart of heaven itself – made himself known, and taber-

naded among us. And so we beheld his glory, in bodily form. Now, in Jesus, ‘from the fullness of his grace we have received [the fullness of the covenant of] grace in the place of [the promissory covenant of] grace’ (John 1:16).<sup>17</sup> As the law at Sinai revealed God’s eternal character, so Christ the Son revealed it supremely, with surpassing glory and radiance, the exact image of God made visible (Hebrews 1:5; Colossians 1:15ff).

As the law revealed the wonderful, ultimately eschatological, promise (in stone) of what God’s people would be, by his grace, so in Jesus the full wonder of it is revealed in flesh. The promise is the same, but its richness and fullness is now of a new order altogether. For now our great hope is not merely that one great day our sin shall be left behind us and we shall be righteous, our character and holiness at last in conformity to the message inscribed upon the stone tablets of Sinai. Wonderful as that promise is in itself, we, upon whom the fulfilment of the ages has come, can say more – much more. We shall be **like Jesus!** We have not only the prophecy of the stone, but also the evidence of the flesh. We stand on this side of a glorious fulfilment in Jesus, the Saviour who is the perfect embodiment of all God’s righteous purpose for man as covenant keeper and holy son. And through his resurrection we are the inheritors of the wonderful certain hope ‘that when he appears, we shall be like him’ (1 John 3:2).

It is no accident that Paul says the resurrection declares Jesus to be the Son of God in power ‘according to the Spirit of holiness’ (Romans 1:4). The resurrection declares Jesus as the triumphant Son of God with power, the last Adam, the man of the new age.<sup>18</sup> This age is to be marked by the reality of the life-giving Spirit, the Holy Spirit who gives new hearts of flesh, and who writes his holy law upon them, animating them to walk in his ways (Jeremiah 31:33ff; Ezekiel 36:26ff). Now, says

<sup>17</sup> See Carson’s commentary on John (IVP, 1991) for a conclusive discussion of the exegesis of καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος (grace for grace) in John 1:16.

<sup>18</sup> The Christological contrast in view in Romans 1:4 is not between the two natures of Christ, but the two states he participates in as the divine Son: the fleshly and the spiritual; cf the similar thought expressed as the ‘natural’ (ψυχικόν) and the ‘spiritual’ (πνευματικόν) in 1 Corinthians 15:44. The last (lit. eschatological) Adam is the pattern for all who follow in the resurrection that comes by him (See 1 Corinthians 15:20-22; 42ff).

Paul, if anyone is in Christ, not only is there new birth, but there is evidence of new creation; the eschatological age of the second man has begun. The deposit, the seal that guarantees to us all that is yet to come, is the same Spirit of holiness, the Spirit who now indwells believers. This is the monumental difference that Pentecost signifies: the Spirit who animates believers is now not only the Spirit of God, but the Spirit of God incarnate, the God-Man, the eschatological Adam. The glory issuing from Christ’s resurrection and ascension is that the Spirit who now indwells us does so in his specific identity as the Spirit of our risen Lord Jesus Christ – the Spirit of a real obedient, perfected, vindicated and glorified humanity. Quoting Abraham Kuyper, Sinclair Ferguson summarises the profound implications of this reality.

‘What a redeemed soul needs is human holiness.’ Angelic holiness will not serve fallen man. If we are to be holy, that holiness must be wrought in our humanity. This is what Christ accomplished. And now the Spirit, out of his union with the incarnate Son, brings those resources to bear upon the lives of believers. Because of his ministry in Christ he can now indwell us to reproduce the same holiness in our lives. And so, adds Kuyper, ‘The Holy Spirit finds this holy disposition in its required form, not in the Father, nor in himself, but in Immanuel, who as the Son of God and the Son of Man possesses holiness in that peculiar form.’<sup>19</sup>

In the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, we see two things with the utmost clarity: the law as it images the holiness and goodness of God, and also man as the holy and perfect image of God he was created to be. The Holy Spirit, through regeneration and new birth, inaugurates us into a union with this Christ, so that the life we now live in the body is truly his life of holiness in us (Galatians 2:20). It ought to be no surprise, then, that according to the New Testament gospel a principal fruit of the Spirit’s work in us is that ‘the righteous requirement of the law might

<sup>19</sup> Sinclair B Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (IVP, 1996), 72.

be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Romans 8:4). 'Because the law reflects his image, it is the true law of our true nature. In obedience we are living according to our revealed definition, we are being ourselves'.<sup>20</sup> This is what the Law itself always promised and prophesied. It is the exalted goal of God's creating purpose; it is the triumphant accomplishment of his re-creation, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

### **Christ is the magnificent climax**

And so, in emphasising, as Scripture demands we must, the continuity of the covenant promises from the dawn of time until their fulfilment and climax in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must nevertheless give full weight to the magnificence that attends the age of fulfilment. This fulfilling, surpassing nature of the revelation of God in the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ is so glorious, that Paul can say even the glory of the previous zeniths of God's revelation among his people, such as the Mosaic administration, now pale into insignificance in the light of the glory of Christ fully revealed. 'What once had glory has come to have no glory at all because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory' (2 Corinthians 3:10-11).

Moreover, as the work of Christ has now inaugurated the new covenant in his blood, the call to respond, the call to the obedience of faith, to righteousness by faith in Christ alone, is also a call that surpasses all that has gone before, in both its urgency and its demands. The voice that commands from the glory of Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, is a voice that demands more than did ever the voice that shook the earth from Sinai's glory. And 'if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven ... for our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:25,29). Yet, if the demands are greater, so too are the promises upon which they are founded. The call to obedient faith is now based not on a promise that looks only to future fulfilment, but

<sup>20</sup> Motyer, *Look To The Rock*, 78.

backwards to an historically accomplished atonement, and to the resurrection of Jesus which proves that in Jesus every promise of God's covenant grace is both yes and amen. We trust and obey, we 'circumcise our hearts' (Deuteronomy 10:16), not only because we have faith that one day God himself will somehow provide the means to effect that inward transformation which we cannot of ourselves accomplish (Deuteronomy 30:6); we know this *has been* provided through Jesus the Christ who has come. It is through him that God has once and for all circumcised the hearts of his people 'in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ' (Colossians 2:11).

What the Law anticipates we, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come, inherit with joy and rich satisfaction. Our revelation of God is superior: 'we see Jesus' (Hebrews 2:9). The clarity of our future inheritance, of what we shall be, is greater and more wonderful than ever anyone had under Moses: we shall be with him and 'we shall be like him' (1 John 3:2). And, because all is accomplished in the risen Jesus Christ, our hope is greater and more certain, and the promises upon which it rests are 'better promises' (Hebrews 8:6). But our responsibilities are also higher, and the demands on us the more awesome just because our privileges are so surpassing and glorious. We, above all people throughout the history of God's redemption, must 'see to it that we do not refuse him who speaks' his climactic word in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:25).

### **THE LAW OF GOD AND THE CHRISTIAN BELIEVER**

What then of the law for the Christian believer? Could Jesus in any way have come to abolish or set aside the law? The answer must already be clear, given the trajectory of the law itself from the beginning. Because of what it promises so extravagantly, it always pointed beyond itself, looking not only for the fulfilment of what the law describes and demands in human flesh, but also the *means* by which this promised future should be brought about, despite the sin of even the most faithful of men. It looked forward not to its abolition and its destroyer, but

to its fulfilment, and to the one who would bring about that fulfilment for, and in, God's people. Hence, we should not be surprised to read in Matthew's Gospel, a presentation intent on demonstrating both the continuity of the gospel of Christ with the Old Testament promises, and their fulfilment and climax in Jesus Christ and his kingdom, the Lord Jesus himself announcing at the outset of his ministry

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

### Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfil the law

Jesus came to fulfil the prophets, but not just in the familiar and specific predictions of the coming of the Messiah that we all know so well from the Christmas readings. He came to fulfil the totality of the message of all the prophets, spoken and written, as down the ages they uttered forth the message of God's great covenant purposes. Consistently from the beginning, and with ever accumulating momentum as the history of redemption unfolded through time, this prophetic word spoke of God's salvation of a wayward and sinful people, making them holy forever, a work to be accomplished by his own mighty arm in redemption, in the overthrow of his (and their) enemies, and through his just and righteous judgement on evil and the wicked.

But not only the prophets; he also came to fulfil the law, which underlay the message of the prophets from the beginning. He came to display in himself, decisively and definitively, the very heart of the eternal covenant, the heart of the eternal heavens, the 'holy of holies' of God's very being – and to do so ultimately, absolutely and finally, in all its fullness and surpassing glory. And he came to accomplish for his people and in his people the fulfilment of all the promises of the law concerning the transformation of holiness in them, the radical regeneration that alone would fit them for the promised inheritance of glory, making them at last truly 'a people holy to the LORD your God as he has promised' (Deuteronomy 26:19).

For Christian believers, then, in these 'latter days' (long prophesied and now come), this fulfilment of the law in Jesus Christ, has several implications.

### 1 A fuller revelation has been given

At Sinai there was no form; now we have seen God in the flesh, the living embodiment of God's covenant law. He exhibits the law in every way perfectly, not only as the surpassing radiance of God's glory incarnate for all to see, but because he demonstrates the perfect covenantal response of human obedience to God. This is what the whole Law (and the prophets) was pointing to and prophesying about. Here it is in the flesh of man, and here it is in its finality and completeness. There is no further revelation of God, his covenant or his law. In these last days 'he has spoken to us by his Son' (Hebrews 1:2). This is his full, and his final, word. To paraphrase Deuteronomy 5:22, this is the word he has spoken 'and he added no more'. The revelation given through Moses was always going to be a fading glory giving way to something greater (2 Corinthians 3:11); nothing could, or will ever, supersede the revelation that has come in Christ Jesus the Son.

### 2 A fuller response has been demanded

Further, since new covenant people of God have had this surpassing revelation of God's covenant in Christ himself, not only are our privileges heightened, so also are our responsibilities, in terms of fitting response to the fullness of grace made known. The time of the last days, the *eschaton*, has begun, and we are already living in that new covenant age. It is not yet fully realised, until the last of the 'latter days' come with Christ's return, and so there is a 'not yet' ahead of us still. Nevertheless, through our baptism with the Holy Spirit we do already partake of the privileges of this eschatological age of fulfilment, the age characterised supremely by the Spirit of holiness. Hence, says Jesus himself, greater righteousness is required for kingdom people, not looser commitment to the commands of God (Matthew 5:19; cf 1 Corinthians 7:19).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The ESV translates Matthew 5:19 accurately: 'whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments...' the verb *λυω* (*luo*) means to loose, or relax not 'break' as in NIV).

As witnesses to the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ, we have seen not just the shadow, and heard how to respond, we have seen the reality in the flesh of what it means to be a human being in perfect righteousness. We have the commandments enfolded. Moreover, we have the supreme demonstration of the ‘greatest commandment’, in the obedience of Christ even to death on a cross for his people, through love for God and for his ‘many brothers’. The ethical, manward implications therefore supersede anything in the past for God’s people. We have a commandment, new not in its substance ‘love one another’ (*Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 10:19*), but in its intensity and completeness of self sacrifice: love them ‘as I have loved you’ (*John 13:34*). Under the old covenant revelation, sanctification was always a matter of conformity to the family pattern: ‘Yahweh (your Father) am holy; you (my children) shall be holy also’.<sup>22</sup> But now the clarity of the new covenant frames this in sharply Christological terms. ‘I am Yahweh who sanctifies you’ (*Leviticus 20:8*) becomes, on Jesus lips, ‘for them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified’ (*John 17:19*). We are indwelt by the Spirit of this Jesus, who, by uniting us with him, is the agent of our sanctification. It is the Spirit of a Saviour exalted through self-humbling and loving obedience even to death for his brethren who dwells in our hearts, and conforms us to his image. The true God-likeness, the ‘family’ response required in covenant obedience, is true Christ-likeness. This, and this alone, is the true humanity we are called to in the gospel.

### 3 A fuller authority has been proclaimed

Thirdly, we have now had expounded in the gospel a covenant way of life not just for the land of Israel, but for the universal Kingdom, for the whole Israel of God that has, in Jesus Christ, been brought into being to fulfil the very first promise to the father of all Israel, Abraham himself (*Genesis 12:1-3*). This new covenant teaching was not mediated through Moses (as the covenant way of life for Israel in the land was; cf *Galatians 3:19*), but it came unmediated, through Jesus himself, the author and lord of the Covenant. This direct, authoritative message is summed up

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the repeated pattern ‘I am Yahweh’ throughout *Leviticus 19*; cf *Leviticus 20:7-8, 26; Deuteronomy 14:1ff, 26:18ff* etc).

decisively by Jesus himself in terms which both echo and heighten the voice of the law: ‘be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect’ (*Matthew 5:48*). As the Father’s perfection has been demonstrated in Jesus himself, who reveals him in all his fullness, so must your holiness be, and so shall it be.

New covenant demands come not with less authority than Moses (or the teachers of Moses), but with more – much more, as the people who heard them testified with great astonishment (*Matthew 7:28-29*). These demands come to us with the authority not merely of a prophet, a faithful servant of God who warned about judgement for disobedient unbelief, but by the right of the promised prophet (*Deuteronomy 18:18*), the one who will himself be our judge, and who by our fruit will know beyond all doubt whether the tree that produced it is good or bad (*Matthew 7:15ff*). We do well to pay heed to the voice from the glory that bids us ‘listen to him’ (*Matthew 17:5*)

### 4 A fuller glory demands greater awe and reverence

Hebrews chapter 12 sums up this relationship of Sinai to Christ as a movement from the lesser glory to the greater glory<sup>23</sup>, and concludes that as well as the surpassing privilege we have as inheritors of the new covenant promises, we also have far less excuse. Therefore, we must be even more careful not to ‘refuse him who speaks’ now, and must ‘worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe’: that is, respond with proper obedience to the fullest revelation of covenant demands (or law) there has ever been. The point is that in the fulfilment Christ delivers in the new covenant, everything is greater than it was under the old covenant administration; the privileges of grace, and also the responsibilities, and threats, of law. Put another way, just as there is more grace in the gospel than there is in the Law, there is also more ‘law’ in the gospel than in the Law. If the Law was a joy and a delight to faithful believers, and a scourge to the disobedient, how much more is the gospel, with its full fragrance of the knowledge of Christ, ‘to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life’

<sup>23</sup> Similarly, cf 2 *Corinthians 3*.

(2 Corinthians 2:16). Nothing, even in the darkest passages of the Old Testament, could be so comprehensively damning as the indictments Paul piles up in the first two chapters of his exposition of ‘the gospel of God’ in Romans. Nothing is so categorical and final as the words of our Lord himself on the separation of the righteous and the wicked, and nothing so chilling as the graphic portrayal of the final consequences of sin in the gospel of the apocalypse.

We who hear the word of God today must take the terrible glory of the gospel seriously. God’s grace is no cheap grace. The Hebrews writer asks the question ‘how much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned [not just the law of Moses but] the son of God, and has profaned [not just the blood of animal sacrifices but] the blood of the covenant’? He concludes – and he is writing to those who profess to be Christians – ‘it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Hebrews 10:29,31), more fearful for us than for the church in the wilderness, because a fuller glory demands not less, but more reverence and awe. Similarly, it is to New Testament believers that Paul tells of Israel’s unbelief, and warns ‘do not become proud, but stand in awe’ and take seriously both ‘the kindness and the severity of God...lest you be wise in your own conceits’ (Romans 11:20-25). The people of Israel ‘were afraid and trembled’ in response to the covenant revelation at Sinai (Exodus 20:18), a reaction that the Lord endorsed as entirely right and appropriate, wishing ‘that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments’ (Deuteronomy 5:28-29). A fuller glory demands more, not less, of this attitude of heart and mind from God’s people.

### **The law is the struggling believer’s trusty and gracious friend**

But, we might ask the question, ‘if the law is written on our hearts by the Spirit under the new covenant, why do we still need the law? Don’t we now walk by the Spirit?’

Well, yes and no. We are recipients of the new covenant blessings, but as discussed already, we are so in a now-but-not-yet sort of way. Our salvation is inaugurated in this age, but not yet consummated. For our ‘full salvation’ we still look to the future. This is the consistent message

of the New Testament. The ‘Day of the Lord’, long awaited by the prophets, is revealed to be the whole gospel age beginning with Jesus’ birth and extending until his coming in glory. That day of final judgement is delayed, for the sake of mercy. Before it stretches out a long ‘day of salvation’ during which the gospel is being proclaimed throughout all the earth, and the elect of God gathered in from among the nations of the world. For this reason there is an ‘already’ and a ‘not yet’ dimension to every aspect of our salvation. So, as Jeremiah 31:33ff prophesies, and Paul’s great eighth chapter of Romans confirms, the law is *already* written on our heart by the Spirit. The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us to set us free, so that we are no longer ‘in the flesh’ but ‘in the Spirit’. Nevertheless, the experience of the present time, although epoch-breaking, is still only the deposit; it is indeed the guarantee, but *not yet* the full possession, so that (notwithstanding the interpretation of some as to the nature of the ‘victorious’ life of Romans 8) ‘we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit’ are still those who, along with the whole creation, ‘groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies’ (Romans 8:23).

The righteousness of the law is indeed fulfilled in us through the Spirit, but this is true in our experience only in so far as we walk ‘not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’ (Romans 8:4). But our great problem is that we know we are still flesh,<sup>24</sup> and will be until we are rescued from ‘this body of death’ (Romans 7:24). So there is an inevitable tension. We are still, in our flesh, unhappy slaves to sin, though in our minds – our new, redeemed, eschatological nature in Christ – joyful slaves to God’s holy, righteous and good law. Indeed, there is more than mere tension; there is out and out enmity. The flesh and the spirit are in conflict with each other (Galatians 5:17); they are at war (Romans 7:23; 1 Peter 2:11)!

To put it simply, and personally, when I am walking most closely to Christ, and keeping in step with the Spirit, it is true to say I do not need the law in any external sense. It is beating strongly in my heart, kept in rhythm by the ‘pacemaker’ of God’s Spirit within me. I long to be holy. I

<sup>24</sup> Unless we determinedly espouse perfectionism, and an over-realized eschatology.

want to be as holy as a justified sinner can be this side of heaven. I do not want to commit adultery, or lie, or steal or hate or serve other gods. But, alas, sometimes (actually, often) the flesh does rear its ugly head. Indeed, most perversely, I find that sometimes when I most want to do good (not to earn favour, but to show the Lord how much I love him, and rejoice in his wonderful redemption) well, that is the very time I find, like Cain and like Paul, sin is crouching at my door (*Genesis 4:7, Romans 7:21*)<sup>25</sup>. The desire to lie or steal or look in lust (or worse) is right there with me. My heart is deceitful (*Jeremiah 17:9*) and is deceiving me still.

But now, and for such a time as this – thank God! – the law is my greatest friend! Wielded by the Holy Spirit it comes to me, discerning the thoughts and attitudes of my heart, to turn me back to the truth, and to bring me back to the wonderful covenant relationship I am tempted to spoil. It comes as a concerned spiritual brother, to remind me of what pleases the Lord and ‘to restore me gently’ (*Galatians 6:1*), but, if necessary, as a sharp double-edged sword to arrest my thinking and warn me of the terrible consequences of going on in rebellion. It comes ‘piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow’, to jolt me to my senses, and by reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness to ‘turn a sinner from his way, and save me from death, and cover a multitude of sins’ (*James 5:20*). What a gracious provision this is! ‘Oh how I love the law’ which is so faithful a friend, to guide me and to help me know the smile (and the frown) of my heavenly father – until the day when the promise is finally accomplished, and I shall worship wholly according to the law of love and life. How I rejoice that my friend the law will not desert me, but will be with me, as an instrument of grace in the hands of the Spirit, to teach me all along the way. For so it shall be until the promise of the new covenant is fully realised, and the law shall be written perfectly over a new heart of

<sup>25</sup> Is it significant that the first mention of ‘sin’ in the Bible is in these striking terms of a personalised force that desires to have mastery over the human heart? Compare the language of domination in *Romans 6*, and the personification of sin and evil in *Romans 7:21ff*, and cf *James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8*.

resurrected flesh. For only then, in that kingdom, will we at last know true ‘singleness of heart and action so that we will always fear him’ (*Jeremiah 32:39*). Only then will no one any longer have to teach his brother or neighbour to know the Lord, for ‘all shall know him from the least of them to the greatest’ (*Jeremiah 31:34*).

## AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE GRACIOUS NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE LAW

I like to think of the law as like a map – God’s map, which charts out his plan and purpose, shows me his destination for me, and tells me how to travel there. But even a perfect map cannot take you anywhere, without a vehicle to carry you.

### Man in innocence: a journey begun

In the beginning, God created man with the vehicle – a perfect nature – and laid out his map. He revealed his covenant directions – to worship God and rule under him, and so to bring the whole creation under his sovereignty, making it all like the garden; and he revealed the destination – an eternal existence in God’s presence, in perfect fellowship. Thus the map was a means of directing man’s righteous and holy response to God, and to the grace expressed in the very creation itself.

### Man by nature in sin: lost and powerless

But sin destroyed the vehicle, and even the map has lost its clarity for fallen man. He is blinded. Even when by God’s gracious revelation man’s eyes are opened and he can see the map clearly, what can the map do? It does precisely what it does for a traveller lost without a vehicle.

- First, it shows with clarity that man is lost.
- Then, it shows him where he ought to be
- Third it shows him how he ought to travel if he had a vehicle, but reminds him that he has no vehicle to take him, and without a vehicle all hope is lost.
- So it drives him to seek out that vehicle as the first and most pressing concern.

Just so with the law of God. First, it reveals sin as sin. Then, it shows us the perfect righteousness we cannot attain. It shows us a way of life that is beyond us, and drives us to seek grace in the saving work of Christ.

### **Man in grace: found, and travelling onwards**

But if, by grace, we find ourselves in Christ, having sought him, we find we are now rejoicing in a new (and actually far better) vehicle, and are already on the road again and heading for the glorious destination. We are no longer lost, and we have in sight the map which still is pointing us to the wonderful end of our journey.

In fact, we find that we have so come to love the very thought of this map, with all its revelation of our glorious destination, that we pore over it more and more, so that the way of travel becomes ever more familiar to us. We even find that much of the time we can travel along without needing to use the map, because we have taken it so to heart.

So it is with the believer. The law – the wonderful law of life, the lamp to our feet and light to our path – is internalised by the Spirit increasingly, as we grow and mature as believers, feeding day by day on Christ in all the Scriptures, and walking in the Spirit, our internal travelling companion and map-reader.

But, as we grow, we find ourselves travelling along now familiar roads. Whereas at first we needed to use the map a lot, so as to ‘find out what pleases the Lord’ (Ephesians 5:10), now we seem to need the map much less often; we know the way much better. Yet, there are still times when we lose concentration and take a wrong turning. We can sometimes even get very badly lost. So we reach into the glove box and pull out our trusty map (or, sometimes, when we are too proud to think we need a map, a faithful friend will have to put it under our nose!) Again, it reveals our wrong turning, shows us the way back, and points us again in the right direction – only, of course, because the map is being used within the vehicle which actually carries us there.

Just so is the law, which is our constant friend, our map, to bring us graciously back when we take a wrong turn through sin and rebellion, and point us again to the right road. How often the Scriptures can suddenly arrest us, be it through preaching or in our regular reading, and show up some aspect of God’s perfect law that we have been

ignoring or avoiding. And how we need this chastening of the repeated command to yield once again to the Lordship of Christ in all things, and to be what we truly are, as redeemed and holy children. But always, of course, such experience makes us ever more thankful for the trusty and constant vehicle of the grace of God in Christ in which we are seated, and which alone can actually take us back along the road and to the destination that the law has from the very beginning pointed us to, and promised us we shall one day reach.

### **Man in glory: arrived!**

And so, until the day the journey ends, the trusty map of God’s gracious law will always be there to guide us, put to use as it is by the great engine of God’s redeeming grace in which we are being propelled forward, irresistibly, to that goal.

And when we have at last arrived, we will only then pack away our map, for it will have finished its wonderful job when ‘everything is accomplished’ (Matthew 5:18). Then we shall look back and see that it has been the most reliable and wonderful blessing to us throughout all the ages, and it has never worn out, faded or become indistinct. Even the tiniest symbols and contours were conspicuous right to the end, each one contributing its part to the wonderfully rich and full journey, each one adding some aspect of advice on the most profitable way to travel, or furnishing some aspect of anticipation of the destination to encourage and delight the imagination.

But when we have packed away our map, and said a somewhat tearful goodbye to our trusty lifelong companion and friend, we shall discover a most wonderful thing. Each and every part of the map, even down to the tiniest jot and tittle of the symbols and contours, we shall see are now before our eyes everywhere, as we look around that glorious destination. All the things we loved about that journey, and that the map had signified and led us to, are still here! But now they seem somehow different. They are clearly recognizable to us – we have come to know and remember them intimately – but they are changed. They seem to be bigger, and better, more solid and lasting. They are not just two-dimensional things on a map, they have become three-dimensional – solid, substantial, and permanent.



What joy! Every one of those wonderful places we stopped for refreshment along the way, every one of those little things that encouraged us when we were downcast, every one of those things that filled our hearts with thankfulness for the joy of creation, every one of those things that had given us knowledge, and understanding, and made us grow and become more fully human, is *here*. Nothing we cherished about our map and the experiences it led us through has been lost! We need not have worried at all about what our destination would be like, as though our journey bore no relation to the end. Nor need we ever have had thoughts during our journey that most of this map was now useless because we had already travelled so far, or that we needed only the last few pages of it to get us through the last leg of the journey.

No! Now we are here, we see that the map has prepared us for an *ongoing* journey in our destination! We are not going to stop travelling, now, and put our feet up. We are just at the beginning. Our map was taking us around the practice laps; now we are just about to begin the real thing. The map took us through the two-dimensional journey; now we continue afresh in a three-dimensional world, the *real* world! And we realise, with great joy, that though our old two-dimensional map can now be laid aside, it has done its work well. For in this wonderful new journey – which will be a never ending one, in which we never tire or fade – we have a *new* three-dimensional map, written in perfection in our mind and heart. Our trusty old map, which throughout our journey had become more and more a part of us, has at last become completely part of us. It has gained for itself a body of incorruptible, resurrection flesh, that it may take us on a new journey to far greater and better things, a journey of excitement and wonder, living-out forever the reality to which the map had pointed from the very beginning!

Only *one* thing will no longer be required of this new map of flesh. It will never again have to do the unhappy work of pointing out when we have become lost on the way, for lost-ness on the way is something that was left behind in the ‘map lands’.<sup>26</sup> In this journey, in the *real*

<sup>26</sup> To borrow a concept from CS Lewis!

world, no longer will anyone ever have to ask directions from his fellow traveller, for we shall all, from the least to the greatest, know the way of the Lord of this land, to travel in it. For the Lord himself will inspire us to fear him, so that we shall never turn away from him, or from his map. We will not be able to, nor shall we ever want to.

### **Loving the law of God**

And so, in anticipation of the day when the law of life shall at last perfectly become flesh in our hearts, becoming greater, fuller, lasting and perfect, enabling us fully in our resurrected bodies to glorify God and enjoy him forever, should we not now, in these ‘map lands’ rejoice in the law that promises, sanctifies and anticipates the greater glory still to come? In doing so, we join the ranks of men and women of faith from the beginning of redemption’s story, who, like the psalmist, have always cherished God’s holy law as sweeter than honey, and more precious than gold and silver. They did so because it was to them the law of life, and because it was the law of the Lord they loved and served. We, upon whom the fulfilment of the ages has come, do so for reasons which are the same, yet greater and richer still. For in the climax and fulfilment of the gospel we possess and treasure the law as the law of the Lord Jesus Christ, our risen Saviour and King, whose glory we have beheld in the flesh. Of him we can say ‘he loved me, and gave himself for me’ (*Galatians 2:20*). His voice we have heard, and trusted, and followed. Him we have loved, and him we obey.

[We] have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.

1 Peter 1:2

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.

John 14:21

Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 3:24

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long

Open my eyes that I may see

wonderful things in your law.

I am a stranger on earth;

do not hide your commands from me.

My soul is consumed with longing for

your laws at all times.

Psalms 119:97;18-20



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The fundamental conviction underlying the work of The Proclamation Trust is that when the Bible is taught God's voice is heard. The main aim of the Trust, therefore, is to teach the Bible to preachers in order that they can in turn teach it to others. A further aim is to provide a fellowship of like-minded evangelicals across denominational lines for encouragement in an exacting work.

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