

LAW: Not Bound On The Dead

If the Law of Moses was destroyed by being nailed to the cross, then we could rightly say that the law died on the cross. We might justify our conclusion by quoting Paul in Romans 7:2-3: *“Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. 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.”* Paul was not discussing marriage but was using it as an illustration of the principle of law. So we expect him to declare that the husband (law) died freeing the Jewish believer to be joined to Christ. But in a strange twist, Paul does not make that point!

In Verse 1, Paul asks, *“Do you not know, brethren -- for I am speaking to those who know the law -- that the law is binding on a person only during his life?”* Then in Verse 3 he confirms that point, saying, *“Likewise, my brethren, YOU 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 to God.”* No law applies to dead people -- well, maybe none except our “death tax!”

It may be surprising to some to learn that, instead of the law dying, it was the sinner who died. *“You have died to the law through the body of Christ,”* Paul assures, and he adds, *“But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit”* (Rom. 7:4, 6). Further, Paul confesses, *“For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose”* (Gal. 2:19-21). Not only is our list of infractions (bond) nailed to the cross, but the believer was nailed to the cross also symbolically being crucified with Christ.

Paul actually told them when that symbolism was fulfilled: *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we might walk in newness of life”* (Rom. 6:3-4).

Yes, when we were crucified with Christ, his gracious atonement nullified the power of law. Law only had power to bring sin. No law, or system of law, could, or can, save. When we died to law, we were no longer held by sin, for where there is no law there is no sin. With Hosea, Paul exults, *“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy*

sting?" Then he answers, "*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor. 15:55-57). By his atonement Jesus "reduced to inactivity" the power of law to bring death. By his resurrection, and by his redemption and resurrection of those under the Law (Gal. 4:4), and the giving reconciliation and life to believers, he destroyed the last enemy which is death.

The Law of Moses was a schoolmaster-tutor-custodian to bring Israel to Christ for atonement (Read Gal. 3:21-29). Because the blood of animals could not atone for sin, offerings of atonement were constant reminders of the need for a better sacrifice. Thus the requirements of the law pointed to Christ whose once-for-all-time offering could take away their sins and "reduce to inactivity" the ordinances and rituals of law. Jesus fulfilled, or completed, the meaning of the ordinances and rituals. He fulfilled the purpose of the covenant with Israel. In his return (*parousia*) the last chapter in redemptive history was completed.

Early in his ministry Jesus indicated that there would be some sort of extension, or overlapping, of the commandments into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19-20). Not a jot or tittle of them would pass until heaven and earth passed away at their fulfillment. That dramatic language of celestial upheaval was used among the Hebrew writers denoting the overthrow of a system. It was used again by Jesus in Matthew 24:29-38 relating to the *parousia*, the coming of the Lord at the consummation of the covenant of law with Israel.

Yes, the atonement on the cross reduced to inactivity the covenant of law, but it did not leave people "law-less," or unaccountable, from then until Pentecost. Devout Jews in Rome and Alexandria were not made sinners on Pentecost when the gospel of grace was proclaimed and people entered the kingdom. Jesus had said, "*And the gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end* (of the covenant with Israel -ch) *will come*" (Matt. 24:14).

About thirty years after Pentecost, Paul spoke of "*the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven*" (Col. 1:13; 1:5-6; Rom. 10:18). During this period Judean disciples continued to keep the law (Acts 21:17-26). The Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) forbade the binding of circumcision, which represented the law, upon Gentiles, but there was no indication that Jewish believers would forsake it. After that, Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). On his last trip to Jerusalem he "*cut his hair, for he had a vow*" (Acts 18:18). Paul, however, was rightly adamant that no one could look to the law for salvation for that would have made Christ's death unnecessary. That would make salvation by law instead of grace. But law-keeping as a matter of devotion and respect for their heritage was not forbidden. In fact, Jesus had taught the Jews to keep every jot and tittle of the law until the "*parousia*" (Matt. 5:19). God gave a period of time for this transition.

So we should not be surprised by the interchange and negotiations between James and Paul when Paul returned to Jerusalem late in his career. The brethren received him gladly. Then James and the elders said to him, *“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the JEWS OF THOSE WHO HAVE BELIEVED; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law. But as for the GENTILES WHO HAVE BELIEVED, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself with them and went into the temple, to give notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for every one of them”* (Acts 21:17-16).

Some Bible students, thinking the law was nailed to the cross and no part of it could be kept rightly by believers, find a real problem with what Paul and the Jerusalem brethren did. But they were only following Jesus’ own teachings in Matthew 5:17-19. They were keeping rituals of the law which had nothing to do with justification. Brash as I am sometimes, I am not ready to indict the apostle Paul, James, and the whole “mother church” which saw most supervision of the apostles, saying that they were inconsistent and in error!

In the sixties of the first century the writer of Hebrews declares, *“In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is BECOMING OBSOLETE and growing old IS READY TO VANISH AWAY”* (Heb. 8:13). The covenant of law had been reducing to inactivity for over thirty years while the gospel message was expanding. It had fulfilled its purpose in leading to the fullness of the covenant of grace. It was ready to vanish.

Jesus said he would fulfill the law. That's what he did. All the ritual offerings would find their fulfillment in Christ -- the Passover, scapegoat, atonement, firstfruits, peace offering, sin offering, trespass offering. Being fulfilled, these ceremonies would become irrelevant and fade from practice. The real thing replaced that which foreshadowed it. The law was not destroyed on the cross, but its fulfillment began then and was completed at the coming of Jesus at the “last day.” Furthermore, it became physically impractical to keep it after their temple was destroyed and their people were scattered.

Law no longer had dominion over those who died with Christ.

(Cecil Hook; July 2003) []