

LAW: Not Nailed To The Cross

Of God it is written that, "He canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). What was nailed to the cross?

Throughout my 70 years in the church, Bible teachers have asserted consistently that the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross. For most of my career I taught that without really questioning the validity of the claim. In more recent times, however, I came to realize that it contradicted Jesus' declaration that he came not to destroy (kataluo: to destroy utterly, to overthrow completely- Vine) the law. With your patient indulgence, I would like to add some thoughts relating to that question. There will be some repetition and reinforcement of points made in FR 173.

Let me introduce the discussion with a few questions. Was mankind "law-less" during the seven weeks after the Cross until Pentecost? If the Law was nailed to the cross, was it not abolished and destroyed? On Pentecost, did the Jews in synagogues throughout the Roman Empire suddenly become alienated and hopeless because their Law was abolished and they had not heard and obeyed the gospel? Could the Jew who entered the Kingdom on Pentecost rightly continue to keep ordinances of the Law? If the Covenant of Law was destroyed by Jesus' death, how could it still have been only "ready to vanish away" over thirty years later as "the day" of the coming of the Lord drew near (Heb. 8:13; 10:25; Compare 2 Cor. 3:7-12)?

Early in his ministry, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told them, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). Abolish (katargeo) means "to reduce to inactivity. In this and similar words not loss of being is implied, but loss of well-being" -Vine. Vine also defines fulfill as meaning "to complete."

If Jesus had told them instead to forsake the Covenant of Law given through Moses, they probably would have killed him immediately. If Peter and the apostles on Pentecost had told the crowd of Jews they should no longer follow Moses and the prophets, instead of 3000 "coming forward" to accept Christ, they more likely would have "come forward" to stone them! We will return to this point later.

To Gentile converts in Colossae who had never been under Moses' Law, Paul explained many years after Jesus' crucifixion, *"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were*

dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, HAVING FORGIVEN US ALL OUR TRESPASSES, HAVING CANCELED THE BOND WHICH STOOD AGAINST US WITH ITS LEGAL DEMANDS; THIS HE SET ASIDE, NAILING IT TO THE CROSS" (Col. 2:11-14). These Gentiles had not been under the Covenant of Law, but each had a list of violations of God's universal law on his record. It was this legal bond or "rap sheet" of violations that was nailed to the cross. OUR SINS, NOT LAW, were nailed to the cross symbolically with Jesus in his atoning sacrifice. God's gracious forgiveness canceled the bond which we owed. Our list of criminal charges was canceled.

If the law was canceled on the cross, then the Jews became sinless, for where there is no law, there is no sin. Sin is a transgression of law.

God's acceptance of them had nothing to do with the Law of Moses, for Paul's next paragraph urges, *"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath"* (Col. 2:16-22; see Rom. 14). They could practice or refrain from practicing those things. They were in the realm of indifference, neither condemning nor saving them.

Paul put foods in proper perspective, writing, "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we eat, and no better off if we do" (1 Cor. 8:8). Concerning both foods and days, he wrote, *"One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God"* (Rom. 14:5-6. Read the entire chapter.) Concerning circumcision, he declared, *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love"* (Gal. 5:6). These three problematic issues in the early church were all matters of indifference unless they considered them necessary for salvation or pressed them into dividing issues.

Judaizing teachers contended, *"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1). Thus, circumcision typified the entire law which would be bound. That would add conditions to the gospel which, in fact, would make it a different gospel nullifying the grace of God. It is in that setting that Paul wrote differently to the Galatians than to the Colossians, *"You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have labored over you in vain"* (Gal. 4:10-11).

If those observances were made issues of salvation, then they would be demanding that grace was dispensed through rituals of Moses instead of the atonement of Christ. So they were addressed by Paul, *"You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace"* (Gal. 5:4). God and Christ could be honored by

the sincere worshipper who kept those ordinances as long as one did not seek justification through them.

That principle applies even today. Who can condemn others today who circumcise their sons, or refrain from eating “unclean” foods, or tithe, or set aside a special day each year in which to praise God for the resurrection and to proclaim it to the world? In such activities we may rightly honor God without looking to them for justification.

One of the ludicrous (I hope God laughs at our inconsistencies) tendencies is for those who cry out against emphasizing the birth of Jesus and the resurrection on special days are usually the ones who are the most insistent “day observers.” They demand observance of fifty-two days each year which they call “the Lord’s day.” They bind certain activities to be performed on the first day of each week and only on that day. They make “Sunday keeping” a “salvation issue,” determining whether or not one continues to receive God’s grace. And that begins to be very frightening -- unless God can laugh at us!

Back to our original text, The New Easy To Read New Testament renders this passage simply, *"We owed a debt because we broke God's laws. That debt listed all the rules we failed to follow. But God forgave us of that debt. God took away that debt and nailed it to the cross."*

Often, Ephesians 2:13-16 is interpreted as a parallel passage to the one in Colossians 2, but they are not parallel. Paul is writing concerning acceptance of Jews and Gentiles in this passage written to the Ephesians. He explains, *"For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end"* (Eph. 2:13-16).

Evidently, Paul here alludes to the wall in the temple area beyond which no Gentile was permitted to go. Jewish law kept them separate, but grace ignores law. Grace is not dispensed according to law. In his flesh on the cross Jesus symbolically "reduced to inactivity" that barrier by no longer considering law-keeping as the condition of acceptance. Thus he could accept mankind from both sides of the wall, both Jews who had lived answerable to the Law of Moses and Gentiles accountable only to God’s universal moral law. They both became one in Christ's body because they accepted the atonement of the cross rather than trusting in conformity to law for justification.

There is more which we will deal with in the next issue, if the Lord wills. Thank you for your patient reading.

(Cecil Hook; July 2003) []

