

What Was 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 67 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 have often wondered that it seemed to contradict 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. Let me introduce the discussion with a few questions.

* Was mankind “law-less” during the seven weeks after the Cross until Pentecost?

* On Pentecost, did the Jews in synagogues throughout the Roman Empire suddenly become hopeless because their Law was abolished and they had not heard and obeyed the gospel?

* If the Law was nailed to the Cross, was it not destroyed?

* 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” thirty years later as “the day” of the coming of the Lord drew near (Heb. 8:13; 10:25)?

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 fulfil 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 fulfil 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 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 many years later, Paul explained, “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 their record. It was this legal bond or “rap sheet” that was nailed to the cross. Our sin, not law, was nailed to the cross symbolically, with Jesus in his atoning sacrifice. God’s gracious forgiveness canceled the bond.

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.

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.”

In a parallel passage written to the Ephesians, he stated in slightly different terms, “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 to the moral law. They both became one in Christ’s body because they accepted the atonement of the cross rather than conforming to law.

We Died To Law

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.

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. 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, the 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 reminded them that they still had their guilt. Their constant reminder of the need for a better sacrifice 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.

If you are inclined to think my arguments are weak and evasive, then explain the questions in our introduction.

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. Paul,

however, was rightly adamant that no one could look to the law for salvation, for that would have made Christ's atonement ineffective, thus causing one to fall from grace. But law-keeping as a matter of devotion and respect for their heritage was not forbidden. God gave a period of time for this transition.

If you will read the whole context of our texts in Colossians 2 and Ephesians 2, you will be impressed that disciples were no longer to be judged by keeping rituals and ordinances like those related to eating food, keeping days, and circumcision. Such were elemental matters beyond which being in Christ lifted them. Why should we squabble about them?

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, after being reduced to inactivity for over thirty years, while the gospel message was expanding had fulfilled its purpose in leading to the fullness of the covenant of grace, 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 it was fulfilled. Furthermore, it became impractical after their temple was destroyed and their people were scattered. []

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