

The Law: A Blessing Or A Curse?

by Orville Freestone, Jr.

"Oh how I love Thy Law!" Psalm 119:97

"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law" Gal. 3:13

Here we have two scriptures, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, both referring to the Law of Moses. Can both be referring to the same thing? Two more different views could not be possible.

The first verse reflects the view of the whole of the Old Testament that the Law is a great blessing. The second is the view of the whole of the New Testament that the Law is both a burden (a yoke) (*Acts 15:10*) and a curse. How can it be both? What is the reason for this difference in attitude toward the Law in the Old and New Testaments?

MOSES

Moses wrote that the Law was a covenant between God and Israel that separated them from all other peoples. (*Ex 19:5,6 & Deut 5:2*) This covenant was the founding of Israel as a nation.

The Law had to do with living a good life in the Promised Land. The command to honor father and mother gave the promise "that thy days may be long on the earth" (*Ex 20:12*) and "that it may be well with thee." (*Deut 5:16*) The blessing of the Covenant is a good and fruitful land while violating the Covenant would be the destruction of the nation. (*Deut 8:19,20 & 11:8,9*) Long life in the Promised Land depended on justice and righteous dealing in commerce. (*Deut 25:15*)

The Law was a Covenant with Israel to govern their life in the land of Canaan. Its blessings pertained to this life, as did its curses. Faithfulness to the Covenant would result in the good life, but apostasy would bring the destruction of the nation and exile.

DAVID

The Hebrew word consistently translated, as "law" is Torah. The meaning of Torah is: instruction, precept, teaching and doctrine. In David's tribute to the Torah, (*Ps 119*) he uses the following descriptive words: testimonies, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word, faithfulness, ordinances, justice, surety, righteousness and, of course, Torah. Thus the meaning of the word is quite broad.

The first five books of the Bible are called "The Torah." Later the term was given to the whole Hebrew Canon. When David sang "Oh how I love Thy Torah" he was referring to the written Word of God.

THE PHARISEES

When Ezra the Scribe reconstituted the temple worship at the return from captivity, there was a zeal for the Covenant that never existed before the destruction of Jerusalem. The priesthood was reestablished, the ritual resumed and synagogues were established. The observance of the Sabbath was previously a home and family event. Now it also became a community event with a regular service to pray and teach the Law.

During the Greek era from about 300 BC there arose various sects among the Jews. The most active and the most respected was that of the Pharisees. They became learned in the scriptures and were the teachers of the Law to the people. They were unpaid as teachers. One of their requirements was that everyone have a trade or skill to make a living. Their compensation for teaching was respect from the people.

They were zealous for the Law as Paul said in *Acts 26:5*. They made rules to enforce the commandments of the Law. As time went on and rules multiplied they became burdensome.

The word "Torah" became "Nomos" in the Greek version of the Old Testament and in the writings of the Greek New Testament. Nomos does not quite mean the same as Torah. Commandment is "Mitzvah" in Hebrew. Nomos more nearly equals mitzvah than Torah. It means rule, custom, requirement, obligation and law in our modern sense.

The Pharisees believed and taught the existence of angels,

the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. They taught that eternal life was an inheritance for those who kept the Law. (*Mk 10:17, Luke 10:25, 18:18*) Jesus did not say that one could not gain eternal life by keeping the Law perfectly. His response was, "who has done so," implying no one could.

One will not find this idea that eternal life could be gained by keeping the Law **anywhere** in the Old Testament. It was there understood to be a law for **this** life in the land of Canaan. It was this misunderstanding by the Pharisees that Jesus and the apostles opposed so vigorously.

The rule of just laws and their wide observance does make for a better (or even good) society and prosperity, but it does not change the heart. Then as now, "the just shall live by faith!" (*Habakkuk 2:4*)

JESUS

Jesus said *Matt 5:17* that He came not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it. He expounded and applied the Law. Seven passages from Matthew will illustrate Jesus' teaching of the Law, though citations could be multiplied.

1. In *Matthew 5*, a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus six times said, "Ye have heard it said ... but I say unto you." In each of these statements He was not contradicting Moses, but the Pharisees and their "interpretation" of Moses. He was affirming the true meaning of the Law.

2. (*Matthew 9:13.*) Jesus condemned the Pharisees not only for their legalism, but also for their lack of compassion. The quotation is from Hosea 6:6.

3. (*Matthew 12:9-13.*) Here Jesus rejected the Pharisees' rules for the Sabbath. He showed that by going beyond the requirements in the Torah they were not only inconsistent, but negated the very meaning of the Sabbath.

4. (*Matthew 15:1-20.*) Here Jesus denounced the Pharisees for violating the Law by their traditions.

5. (*Matthew 19:3-9.*) Jesus was asked by the Pharisees His opinion on divorce. Rabbi Hillel had taught that a man could divorce his wife for any reason whatever. Rabbi Shammai said that a man could divorce his wife only for adultery.

Jesus came down on the side of Shammai, but went further, saying that divorce was permitted, but was not God's will.

6. (*Matthew 22:23-33.*) The Sadducees denied the existence of angels and the resurrection of the dead. They believed the Greek idea of "the immortality of the soul," but not a **bodily** resurrection. Jesus rebuked them for knowing "neither the scriptures nor the power of God."

7. (*Matthew 23:13.*) Jesus denounced the Pharisees with six woes. He denounced their legalism, their practices and their hypocrisies.

PAUL

In his first letter to Timothy, (*1 Timothy 1:8*) Paul said that the Law is good if it is used lawfully. He thus was saying that the Judaizers who dogged his steps were not using it lawfully. He well knew their position for he had shared it before his conversion.

Like Jesus, Paul was not disputing Moses, but the distorted teaching of the Jews of his day. The Pharisees taught that eternal life could be "inherited" by keeping the Law. (*Luke 10:25 & 18:18*) They taught that keeping the Law justified them before God. Thus in *Gal 2:16* Paul declared that by "the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." In *Romans 3:20-31* he states that justification is by faith. This agrees with the Old Testament as Pauls' discourse in Romans four shows.

The idea that eternal life could be gained by keeping the Law is found nowhere in the Old Testament. They who were under the Law before Christ came (*Gal 3:24-25*) were justified by faith, the same as we. (*Rom 4:1-5*)

CONCLUSION

The Torah (Law) was given to Israel as a Covenant by God. It was not given by Him to any other people. It was temporal (*Gal 3:24-25*) "until Christ." It was given to regulate life in Canaan. It was not given to justify one before God. Thus it was a blessing. Misused and abused it became a curse.



Printed by:
Douglas L. Crook, Pastor
Abundant Grace Fellowship
4535 Wadsworth Blvd.
Wheat Ridge, CO 80033