

# STUDY ON THE TORAH

Reflections on This & That

by Jim McGuiggan

## Contents

<b>A TWO-FACED TORAH (1)</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Christians, Jews and Torah</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Franky and Jennifer: Torah's family law</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Law is made for man</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The OT, fulfillment or abrogation?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>The Torah as a gracious gift</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>The Torah is not of faith</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Torah and ageless moral goodness</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Torah and an Eye for an Eye</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Torah and the heart set free</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Torah, Obedience, Life and Death</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>Torah, Paul and Legalism</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Torah: Could it give life or not?</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>Torah: Grace and Truth came by Moses</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Was God once a legalist? (1)</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>Was God once a legalist? (2)</b> .....	<b>50</b>

## A TWO-FACED TORAH (1)

Romans 3:27 wants to know, “Where then is the boasting?” What brought “boasting” into the discussion at this point? Everyone knew the Gentiles had nothing to boast about for God had passed them by in the matter of election and specific covenant and then there was 1:18-32. But 2:17,23 tells us the Jews were boasting about God (as theirs) and in these areas. The boasting in these texts and in 3:27 is not a general discussion about religious people and how they can be self-righteous. The entire discussion centers on the Jews and their boast in the Torah which tied God to them and excluded the Gentiles.

From their own Torah Paul goes on to convict the Jewish nation of widespread and flagrant sin (3:9-19) and since he had already said enough to shut the mouths of the Gentiles that was all he needed to do to close the mouths of the entire human family.

It’s at that point that he claims that the Torah and the Prophets bore witness to God’s righteousness now set forth in Jesus; a righteousness which was independent of the Torah (3:21-26). It’s at that point he asks and answers his question about boasting, saying it was shut out (3:27, with a passive aorist in the indicative). He doesn’t say it “is” excluded although that is true; he says it was or had been shut out.

So there is a Torah that had been all along bearing witness to a time when God would publicly demonstrate his righteousness which would show itself in Jesus on behalf of the entire human family (3:21-26, 29-30).

Had Israel rightly understood the Torah it would have made sectarian boasting impossible, it would have led them to Jesus Christ who was God’s righteousness revealed to and for all humans. Jesus is both the terminus of and the goal to which the Torah was leading Israel only Israel didn’t see it (Romans 9:31-32—10:4). In being self-absorbed and seeing the Torah as that which made them an end in themselves they established their own national

righteousness and missed God's eschatological righteousness in the Messiah. He was the "telos" of the Torah—both termination and goal.

Paul wasn't demeaning the Torah—he was validating it and showing it to be greater than the Jews knew (3:31). Did Jesus end all boasting? He certainly did and he is the essential destruction of boasting but in 3:27 Paul is dealing with boasting as it relates to some "Torah" and he insists that the Jewish Torah as seen from the Jewish angle generated boasting (2:17, 23) but when seen (the same Torah!) from the perspective of faith in Jesus Christ it destroys boasting. It was through the Torah Paul as a Jew died to the Torah and the Torah like a trusted servant took Jews by the hand and led them to the Messiah and so worked itself out of a job (compare Galatians 2:10 and 3:24).

The Torah was at the same time an occasion for sinful boasting (if it was looked at as the religion that excluded all but Israel) and a destroyer of sinful boasting (if it was looked at by faith in Jesus the Messiah who was the goal of the Torah and who apart from the Torah set right with God all who believe in Jesus).

It was also a Torah of sin and death and a Torah of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

## **Christians, Jews and Torah**

Some Christians say silly things about the Jewish Torah. They think its moral teaching has been abolished. They think that it's a legalist's handbook written by God himself. They think that God gave Israel the Torah knowing full well that they couldn't keep it; and then he got mad at them all the time for not keeping it. They think the Torah demanded sinlessness if Israel was to maintain a relationship with God. They think that the Jewish Torah is the same thing as the generalized moral law that the Western world always talks about. They think the Torah required that one earn a relationship with God though, of course, no one could do that. They think that the moral and religious teaching of the Torah (and the OT in general) has no relevance for Christians. All of the above I've read and continue to hear. I've even said some of it in the past.

Paul wrote the book of Romans to Christians—Jew and Gentile. No one disputes that. In dealing with Christian moral and ethical response, he calls on the teaching of the Torah and says that Christians are obligated to it. For example, in 13:8-10, he insists that Christians should owe no one anything "except to love one another." And why does he say they should love one another? The NT in many other places will give us many reasons why we should love one another but Paul gives us one reason in this text. He says we're to love one another "for"—what follows is why we should love one another. For "love is the fulfillment of the law." He then proceeds to quote from the Decalogue. The word "law" (nomos) here designates the Torah from which Paul quotes the strictures against adultery, stealing and the like.

Yes, but these are Christians he writes to. We can understand if he said we're to love one another "for" Christ loved us all and we're to be like Christ. This would be true and central to the Christian faith. But why would he say we're to love one another because love fulfills the Torah? What does the Torah have to do with us?

Part of the answer of course, is that the ethical response God asked of Israel and is proclaimed in the Torah is as true now as ever it was and it's true for the entire Christian community. To rip away the first thirty-nine books of the Bible as irrelevant to us is sheer nonsense. And it only adds insult to injury to dismiss them and then call on them as "illustration material" as if that's all that Paul had in mind in Romans 15:4.

A full response to the Torah involves more than upright behavior—it would call to Jews to accept the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, in whom God has

reconciled the world to himself. The Torah had more than one role to play in God's drama of redemption so it doesn't help anyone if we reduce it to "a call to live uprightly".

But to deny that the NT writers call us to bring our lives into line with the ethical and moral teaching of the Torah is silly. To the Gentile Galatians Paul makes a similar use of the Torah in 5:13-14. This has added significance since he fairly explodes in anger when Jews want to make Jewish proselytes out of Gentile Christians (see chapter 2 and elsewhere in the epistle). He will not tolerate for a moment the idea that Gentiles have to become Jews to be treated as fellow-Christians in full fellowship and yet he calls on Gentiles to live by the Torah's love command. He then goes on to insist that they follow the Spirit. So being guided by the Spirit and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit don't conflict with fleshing out the central call of the Torah. They're all part of the Christian's ethical and moral response to God.

But Christians aren't the only people that say silly things about the Torah. Some Messianic Jews that receive Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah do the same thing.

## **Franky and Jennifer: Torah's family law**

If Israel had said no to the covenant God offered them at Sinai there would have been no life for them. At least no life for that generation that said no to the covenant. We know this is true because when they later refused to be bound by the covenant, at the Golden Calf affair, God was about to destroy that whole generation (Exodus 32). Later still, when they rejected the covenant by rejecting the land which was part of the covenant, the Lord took the lives of that whole generation and left Israel without circumcision and Passover (Numbers 14). For that generation, Israel were wanderers in the strict sense, rather than pilgrims; they were a people without the distinctive marks of having been covenanted with God in Abraham or having been brought out of Egypt.

Nevertheless, saying yes to the covenant God offered them, while it constituted them a nation under God and formally ratified their sonship, it didn't earn them their relationship with God. It was still a gift. The Torah profiled the life that was expected of them as a family. The "parable" that follows may help develop the point I'm wanting to make: Israel was gifted with life with God and the covenantal Torah was the "in house rules" for life as the family of God, for the sons and daughters of God.

### **FRANKY AND JENNIFER**

Franky and Jennifer grew up together. They went to the same school, shared some of the same classes, outside interests and became good friends. They not only admired and respected each other, they began to miss each other when the other wasn't around, and to worry when the other was sick. Nobody was surprised when the two close friends announced they were going to get married.

They had talked a lot about what they wanted out of life and high on the grand list was, "a warm, loving family". How would they achieve that? Well, they'd both been part of families that gave them clues—positive and negative—how to go about it; they were reasonably well-read and though they were young, they weren't dumb. They'd seen and heard much that would act as groundwork on which to build. So they set up home.

A few years later the babies began to arrive. For all the best reasons the two of them found a lot of pleasure and deep joy in the children and, of course, they were committed to holding, feeding, clothing, bathing, loving and providing them with what they needed.

The babies earned nothing, they didn't need to—the parental love was unconditional and unashamed.

As the time slipped by they laughed and rejoiced at every sign of progress in the children. Progress they nurtured and encouraged. There was David's first time to hold the

spoon for himself (even got some food to his mouth), Rachel's first tottering steps, Andrew's successful (and unaided) first read. There was the tying of shoes, the brushing of teeth, the making of beds, the putting on of socks, a bath all by one's self (with nervous parents calling in every thirty seconds, "Are you all right?") and other social challenges which grew more difficult and more complex as the years slipped by.

There were house-rules, of course! No one was allowed to play around with electric sockets or sharp knives, scream at someone, use bad language they heard at school or maybe on TV. There was bed by 8.30 and lights out by nine, there was homework to be done (usually before a favored TV program was watched and there were chores to be done—before or after play didn't matter—but they had to be done.

**The rules weren't created to enslave, narrow or deprive the children. The opposite was true!**

The children learned the behavior that pleased or displeased their parents but it never entered their minds that Franky and Jennifer loved them because they kept the rules. And it never entered their minds that when the rules were sometimes broken that the parents stopped loving them. If someone had suggested that their parents only loved them when and because they kept the house-rules, the children would have scoffed! They knew they sometimes disappointed or displeased their parents; they even knew what it was to be disciplined but it was utter rubbish to suggest that Franky and Jennifer loved them only when they did what they were told. That may have been the case in other homes but not in this home!

The two older children noticed that the "lights out by nine" rule didn't apply in Rachel's room when she developed a real fear of the dark. That made sense. The "lights out by nine" rule was for their benefit, to allow them to get enough sleep but since Rachel had become terrified of the dark, she wasn't getting any sleep at all. In Andrew and Robert's room the rule still applied because it was achieving for them what the parents were aiming at.

One response to Rachel's fear might have been, "Rules are made to be kept no matter what the circumstances, so, nightmares, cold sweats and endless tears notwithstanding, the lights go out at nine." But that would have been a poor response.

Franky and Jennifer would insist that "the law was made for the child and not the child for the law." They would leave the light on while they tried to help eliminate the anxiety.

Since the law was introduced for the child's benefit it's assumed by the parents that the child is more important than the law. To insist that the rule be kept when it's clearly contrary to the child's welfare is to regard the rule as more important than the child and it would violate the parental purpose for the child.

It wouldn't help the other children either to see their brother or sister mauled by a law which was supposed to be a blessing. Parental credibility would be under siege and the relationship under threat. This helped the kids to see that the rules weren't the fundamental realities; that behind the rules was the will of the parents for each child's good. They were learning not only the importance of rules because by a wise application of them the parents were teaching them the place of rules.

As they grew older the parents changed the "to bed" and "lights out" times. That made sense to the children as well. At five years old, in bed by 8.30 seems sensible but at fifteen it isn't geared for their age and maturity. (A maturity which had been helped along earlier by rules such as an 8.30 bed time and the childrens' glad submission to them.) They couldn't always understand why some of the rules were made, even when they asked and the parents explained but the children trusted Franky and Jennifer and supposed that they would understand better later.

And there were times when the rules didn't suit, even when they did understand the whys and wherefores of them. Sometimes they broke them and paid the price of discipline. For example, any eating was to be done in the kitchen at meal or snack times and there was to be no eating done in bed. (Too many children had nearly choked while they ate lying down.) No one was tarred and feathered if they didn't resist the temptation to a snack in bed but there was some sort of discipline ranging from a stern rebuke to loss of privileges.

There were other house rules that hardly needed mentioned because they would have been such a radical departure from family values and aims. Physical abuse of one another, marked verbal or emotional abuse would all have been taken as serious crimes against the family. This was clear from the way persistent squabbling was handled, squabbling that led to some pushing and unbridled speech. It was made plain too by the frequent discussions about some TV programs, news and fiction, as well as experiences at school.

The very idea that someone in a fit of temper would set light to someone's room or hit them with a sharp instrument made coming in fifteen minutes late or smuggling some biscuits to bed appear to be mild transgressions indeed.

This showed that while all house rules were to be kept, some were more important than others. It would have been nonsense to view every house rule as of equal importance. The parents made it clear to the children that there were more important and less important matters in "the law of the house".

I could easily leave you the impression that what the Wilson family did was spend their lives thinking about rules and laws. This is far from the truth!

The proper response to the rules of the home is a wise loving commitment to the family and that's what was nurtured in the Wilson house. They didn't go about thinking of "rules". They didn't always consciously think of their being a family—because of their shaping they simply understood that they were and much of the time they lived out their place in this loving family without analyzing the situation.

The rules were seen as servants to the family unit. They were seen as protecting, promoting, defining and revealing what it meant to be a loving family and not just a collection of free-standing individuals.

I mentioned earlier that a generally wise rule was set aside when Rachel's need was not only not being met by it, she was being injured by it. And the change of bed-time and lights out was made when the rule no longer reflected the conditions/age and new needs of the children.

Let me make the point again: only the rules changed—the aim was maintained. If the rules were contrary to the family's well being, they wouldn't have been made in the first place. If due to changes in circumstances the wise rules no longer gained what the parents aimed for, they were either altered or removed. But as long as the rules served the grand purpose for which they existed, they stood and were gladly obeyed by all the family.

The rules didn't determine the over-arching aim, the rules were there to support and help achieve the over-arching aim: fullness of life for all within a loving family relationship.

Because "life" within a family unit had change and difference written into it, many rules were understood to relate only to specific sets of circumstances and specific times.

David, the older son, noticed that his parents held him more strictly accountable than his brother and sister. He would hear Franky say to him on occasions when all three of them had been disobedient, "You should know better." At first he didn't understand or like this but as he got older he understood, and though he smarted under it at times, he felt good about it. It meant they saw him as more mature and so expected more of him. (He was also pleased because his maturity brought privileges with it. He was free from some of the restrictions the younger ones were still subject to.)

Andrew noticed that while they all had so many things in common, each of them had their own roles in the family. For example, David wasn't the dad and wasn't expected to carry that responsibility. Rachel wasn't the mother and he wasn't David. And dad wasn't Andrew so he didn't have school-work to do. Of course there were jobs that the whole family pitched in to do, jobs that weren't exclusively assigned to anyone (dishwashing and clearing up would illustrate the point) and it was OK for David to give Rachel advice, as Jennifer would do. Just the same, while there was plenty of dialogue and everyone got a fair hearing, it was clear that some responsibilities couldn't be passed off to someone else.

There was no competition in the home to see who kept the most laws or who kept them best. Nobody assessed himself or anyone else on the basis of the number of laws kept or broken. That would have been too simple and it would have missed the whole spirit of the family. Franky and Jennifer would have been appalled if the children ever felt that that was what the parents wanted.

"No," they would have said, "If we gave you that impression we've misled you. The keeping or the breaking of the rules is not the bottom line here. The final issue is: are we committed to each other in love, seeking one another's joy and best interests?"

If Rachel came to Franky and Jennifer every day with a "laundry list" of rules kept and broken, seeking approval from her parents and seeking to be seen as the "child most committed to the family"—if she did that, they would set her down and made some things clear.

Because there could never be enough rules to cover every conceivable life-situation, where guidelines were needed, the parents made new rules. For example, when they went on vacation, they faced new conditions (crowds, fair-grounds, river rides, and the like) so new rules were created that weren't necessary at home. In a large fairground Franky said, "If we get separated for more than thirty minutes, we go to the entrance of that big marquee marked CENTRAL, okay?"

This was a new rule but it served the same purpose that all the other rules served: the protection, enrichment and care of the family. And because this was true, the whole family willingly subjected itself to the new rule. Nobody wanted any member of the family to get lost or hurt or be subjected to needless anxiety.

Safely back home that rule was forgotten while family commitment remained as fresh and vital as ever.

The fact that new rules had to be created because they were on vacation confirmed to Franky and Jennifer what they had always realized: it isn't possible to have enough rules to cover all situations—even if they had thought that was desirable—which they certainly didn't.

#### **Having enough rules would mean there would have to be rules on how to apply rules.**

Let's suppose, one of the rules is: you will be back in the house no later than 10 p.m. On winter evenings. If unintentionally one of the children came in at 10.05 that would be one case but what if one deliberately chose not to make it home by 10? He arrives back in at 11.15 to worried parents who are about to verbally reprimand him and he tells them of a friend who was hit by a passing motor-cyclist and needed to go to the emergency room. He could have made it home by ten but deliberately chose to ignore the "curfew".

Franky and Jennifer would be pleased. That sort of decision could be fitted into the spirit of the family. It shows the maturity and compassion that the parents are aiming to create in the children. In this case, the breaking of the rule honored, and was intended to honor, the parents and the family ("my parents would want me to do this").

To deliberately choose to break the rule to spite the parents, to exercise pride, to "do what I want to do" would have been a different kind of decision altogether.

It was in areas like these that Franky and Jennifer realized with special clarity that they were shaping hearts and lives and not just handing down laws. There were occasions when the children were older that the parents were away and decisions had to be made without their input.

How could the children know, know for sure, what the parents would have wanted under some serious circumstances? Well, they couldn't know for certain just what they would have said, but they had been shaped by their spirits, wisdom and values so that the decisions they came to by themselves weren't completely without parental input. There were some options which just weren't possible for the children in the light of their raising. Of course they could have physically carried them out, but they couldn't have done it and thought they would be pleasing to their parents.

And while people who didn't know the Wilson family perhaps could have suggested other sane options if they had been given the facts, they wouldn't have been as well qualified to know what would please Franky and Jennifer and fit in with the spirit of the family.

The Wilsons learned as they grew together as a family that life wasn't a static "thing"—it was dynamic, it was a relationship, not something you could take in your hand or set on a cabinet and admire; not something "finished". Being a family involved the biological connection (they were all related by "blood") of course, but it meant being committed to one another, seeking one another's highest good. It meant giving and receiving, adjusting or standing firm.

#### **It was loving one another!**

"Love" wasn't simply an emotion, it was a "bias" toward each other, a loyal commitment to one another which showed itself in different emotions depending on the circumstances. Sometimes they cried because the others were crying, sometimes they laughed for the same reason. All the emotions that are part of being human and which are constructive were exerted toward each other.

Behavior and emotions were tested by their relation to the over-arching meaning of "a loving family". They sometimes mistreated each other, forgave and/or confronted each other. The wrongs committed were wrongs that could (and were) gladly tolerated as "within the covenant".

But there were wrongs that were immediate violations of the "family covenant". These involved not only the nature of the acts but the attitude which went with the deeds.

Physical violence was always frowned on but this had to be worked out in light of the foundational values and commitment of the family. A slap in anger would have its consequences but prolonged sly beatings or some form of inflicting pain would be in a wholly different category. A disrespectful word against the parents was unacceptable but a day after day stream of obscenities would be something else.

David in his very late teens got caught up in wrong behavior and the wrong company. He became addicted first to booze and then to cocaine. It was the beginning of a nightmare. The whole family pleaded and worked with him over an extended period, tears were shed, practical help was given, money was spent, abuse was endured, advice was sought but all to no avail. It came to a head after about two years, with David seriously injuring Rachel and holding a knife to his mother's throat, demanding money.

You understand, it wasn't just what David did that turned harmony into chaos, it was his disposition and attitude toward the parents and the children. The wrongs were not only of a foundational nature, they were done in a spirit which demonstrated that at that point the family meant nothing to him.

With sorrow in the hearts of the two children, the parents removed David from the home as someone no longer capable of/willing to live as part of the family. (For two more years he would come back, abusive, smashing windows, ripping tyres and threatening the family.)

What had been lost was more than the willingness/ability to abide by the rules of the family—what had been lost was loving commitment to the family.

No one was pleased at the loss of David! Every member of the family felt the pain of the loss and wished things were different.

Now and then they'd sit and look at each other. Jennifer, in particular worried about their exclusion of David. Franky assured her that what they did was not loveless. They owed something to Andrew and Rachel as well as to one another. A "conflict of interests" had arisen. Love toward the other children meant offering protection to them and it was that expression of love that led to David's exclusion. David wasn't excluded because he was hated or that the family didn't wish him well or had easily grown tired of him. And it certainly wasn't that they had lost all feeling toward him. (Even as they discussed the situation they felt pity toward David and wished things could be as they once were, as they had sought them to be and they hoped that excluding him would bring him to his senses when he felt the loss.)

As Franky and Jennifer reflected on the way they pursued family joy and enrichment through the years, they knew they didn't do everything right. They had made some rules they thought were useful but with hindsight they realized they hadn't been. But their intentions had always been good, their motivation had always been for the blessing of the family as a family.

As deeply as they loved the children they could never have made rules that were purposed to narrow or hurt or cheat them.

Both parents and children knew that love was not without content. There were certain types of behavior that love wouldn't approve--there were things love wouldn't do! On the other hand, there were things love could not avoid doing. It was more than a feeling, it was a commitment and a purpose and it was shaped by a vision of what a deep, rich, full life was.

Later, when the children left home and had families of their own, they would follow the loving guidance of their parents. This wouldn't mean they would do everything the same way, have the same number of rules, the same emphasis and the like. Their family would be a different family with different needs, dispositions and temperaments and while families would always have things in common and have the same over-arching purpose—changed circumstances would require a different approach to things.

**In order for the parents to remain constant they would have to change!**

## **Law is made for man**

In Mark 2 Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath." It must be true that Gentiles and nominal Jews, for whom the Torah means little or nothing, would have had a hard time grasping what a jolting remark this statement by Christ is. Jewish scholars remind us that the Sabbath observance was one of the chief markers of the difference between Israel and the nations and that it expressed the self-understanding of the Jews as God's elect more forcibly than any other ordinance or practice. To say something that looks like it is demeaning the Sabbath must surely have shaken devout Jews and especially people like the Pharisees.

But I wonder what the wider ramifications are, if any, about the laws God has laid before his human family and his elect in particular. What if he were to say, "Baptism is made for man not man for baptism"? Or, "Holy Communion is made for man not man for Holy Communion"? Clearly for those who think little of baptism or the Lord's Supper there'd be little emotional impact but what of those who take these ordinances very seriously indeed?

The nation was called to observe the Sabbath just as the NT church is called to practice baptism and engage in the Eucharistic meal. None of these was the invention of the people to



whom any of them was/is directed; they are the expressed will of God and consequently have the nature of commandments. So what are we to make of the statement by Christ?

A moment's thought will tell us that a commandment by God is made for man. He commands nothing that is not ultimately for the benefit of the hearer so we aren't to set "commandment status" over against "benefit status". Deuteronomy 30:11-20 makes this crystal clear.

But what does Christ mean when he says that the Sabbath was "made for man"? I'm certain we're supposed to understand that God himself is the one who "made" the Sabbath for man. But God didn't make it for angels nor did he withhold it after he had made it; he gave it to man (in this case Israel). If we can imagine God fashioning something and an angel asking him what he was making then we can imagine him saying, "I'm making a thing called 'the Sabbath'." The angel might ask, "And who are you making it for?" and God would say, "I'm making it for man to whom I will give it."

Whatever else is true, the fact that God made it "for" (dia—on account of) man and gave it to him, gives the Sabbath a "gift" nature as well as a command status. But while Mark would agree with the truth that God made it as a gift his point is a bit more specific than that. Mark wants us to understand that when Jesus said that, he was contrasting what God did with the Sabbath and what legal experts had done with it. God gave it as a command that ensured blessing. As if a mother might say to a sick child, "Here, drink this soup that I made for you!" It is no command designed to test his obedience but one that is given in light of his needs. It's true of course that I'm isolating one aspect of God's Sabbath command but that's the one I think Jesus is stressing in his Mark 2 utterance.

By the time the Torah experts were done with it the Sabbath had become a barrier to God's intention. They misunderstood the nature of the Sabbath (in part) because they misunderstood the nature of God and his purpose toward his children. Matthew seems more concerned to make the point that Jesus (his disciples) had not broken the Sabbath since he speaks of "guiltless" and of deeds done on the Sabbath that didn't break it. Matthew seems to be saying that the Pharisees didn't understand what "keep the Sabbath" meant while Mark seems to be saying that they didn't know what the Sabbath was for. Of course being ignorant as to what the Sabbath was for would affect how they thought the Sabbath was to be kept.

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus never broke it and Mark wants us to know that the legal experts never understood it. But both Matthew and Mark converge in saying Jesus and his disciples were guiltless and Mark implies something similar when he speaks of David eating what was "unlawful". They further converge in saying, each in his own way, that man was not to be burdened and that mercy and kindness were paramount. Matthew reminds them of Hosea 6:6 and Mark speaks of the Sabbath being made for man rather than as a burden on man. With a hard heart these Pharisees weren't able to understand Hosea 6:6 which called for mercy (hesed) rather than sacrifice. So what are we to gain from this confrontation?

Jesus nowhere suggests that the Sabbath was not to be observed! Nor would he have tolerated for a moment anyone making light of the Sabbath or the need to observe it. See Matthew 5:17-20.

I think we should understand that while commandments never cease to be commandments that they are gifts from God to mediate life to us. So that the issue should never reduce to "do I have to obey them in order to have life?" It's in the way of obedience that life is to be found. In that very definite sense, keeping God's commandments is a "condition" to be met if we are to have life but it isn't as though commandments are arbitrary tests. The commandments have a character that is in keeping with the nature of the life we seek and need, and that life is relational.

## The OT, fulfillment or abrogation?

In many respects, asking if the OT has been abrogated or “done away” and replaced with the NT is like asking if the first half of a Charles Dickens or John Grisham novel was done away when the books moved toward the end and finally concluded.

If we look at the Bible as the record of God’s unfolding drama (as well as one of the elements used to further the drama) then to speak of Act 1 (let’s say that’s the OT) as being “done away” is the wrong question. It’s not only not done away, without it there is no Act 2 (let’s say that’s the NT) without it and it’s only together that they make a complete drama.

There’s usually an entire network of mistakes and confusion of terms involved when the question is put like that.

When we say the Old Testament (OT) do we mean Genesis—Malachi? Or do we mean just the “Law of Moses”?

When we say “the Law of Moses” do we mean Genesis—Deuteronomy?

Or when we say “the Law of Moses” do we mean just the rules and commandments that we find mixed in with the history that’s “attached”?

When we ask about the “binding” nature of the OT it shows, I think, that we’re looking at it as nothing more than “a law” or “a body of rules and commandments”. But this generates difficulties for us when we’re reading the text of, say, Genesis, where Jacob ends up honeymooning with the wrong woman or Exodus where Moses rescues the girls from bullies around a watering hole. We’re able to say things like, “That story has principles in it that we should pay attention to” but it isn’t easy to see how a story can be called a “commandment” or “a law” or say something like, “That story is ‘binding’ on this person or that.”

It’s at that point we usually say we mean the OT in the sense of the Mosaic Law. That’s a smart move but since the “story” nature of much of the OT (that is, the Bible) is patently obvious it’s a move perhaps we shouldn’t have needed to make in the first place. It’s important for us to be clear what we mean by major terms or we won’t grow as students and we’ll have a hard time coming to agreement with others who aren’t using the words in the way we’re using them. [We lose out in other perhaps more important ways if we’re not careful students and followers.]

In this case, when we narrow the meaning of “the OT” down to “The Law of Moses” we end up implying that the “Law of Moses” is nothing but a collection of commandments. Since we’re fully convinced that “stories” or “narrative” or “plain history” is not “commandment” or “law” material we end up combing through the “law sections” of the “Law of Moses” to find the rules and commands. And if that’s our preoccupation then history and stories and narrative have nothing to say to us. The bulk of the text is only the basket that holds all the “important” stuff—the commandments and the rules. That’s an awful way to treat the OT text!

Now we’re back to the question about the “OT” being done away. When we ask the question it doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense if we mean, “Has the history or the stories or the narrative been ‘done away’?” We can’t say that kind of thing about the biblical narrative material. It’d be like asking if the cross of Jesus is “done away” or has the history in Luke/Acts been “done away”?

It should begin to dawn on us that God doesn’t make his will and purposes known just by ladling out commands and rules. He reveals his purposes in his actions and many parts of the OT text interpret those actions for us and remind us that the events of which God is the author profile the character of God. That being so, these events or acts are never “done away”.

While it’s true that specific acts of God (the call of Noah, Abraham, the Exodus, the Wilderness wandering and the settlement in the Land as examples) are especially revealing

we're not to suppose that God was not moving in the world and among all peoples in what we'd call "everyday life". We shouldn't go hunting through the OT for commands and rules and dismiss the history but nor should we go hunting through the history looking only at the outstanding happenings and dismiss the rest as irrelevant. "Outstanding" events are part of the larger history in which they occur. The Red Sea crossing was a remarkable event but it was imbedded in the real world and involved actual people and elemental forces. If you start pulling the biblical text apart you end up with no Bible at all; just a collection of abstracted rules, rootless wonders and the rest as necessary baggage that can be dumped.

God has revealed himself in history (that is, in the lives of actual people) but he has revealed himself by doing historical things. The events themselves are God showing himself and his intentions. [To be continued, God enabling.]

## **The Torah as a gracious gift**

Years ago I read a man who was Mr. Death on legalism. In the course of his argument he said Israel should have said 'no' to God's offer of the Torah because God was only putting them to the test and they failed that test by agreeing to do whatever the Torah asked. That doesn't agree with God's view as it's reported for us in Deuteronomy 5:27-28, "Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey." God's response to that was, "I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good." God knew that they wouldn't keep the word they gave but he did commend the response.

Joshua (24:2) reminds Israel that their forefathers, in the days of Terah and Abraham, worshiped idols beyond the Euphrates. And what is it that redeemed them? God graciously made himself known to Abraham and so the night of idolatry and polytheism began to dawn toward a full blown knowledge of the one true God who gave Israel his covenant name, Yahweh.

Was this a privilege? Was Israel advantaged by this light? Were they blessed when compared to other nations who worshiped things that crawled and rattled and slithered? Because he opened up the possibility of life with God for Gentiles, independent of the Torah (Romans 2:6-16), Paul gives voice to a Jewish protest in Romans 3:1, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" and answers, "Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God." And later, in Romans 9:3-5, the gifts and privileges he says belonged to Israel include "the receiving of the law". God made himself known to Israel as to no other nation and a part of that self-revelation was the Torah.

Moses is thrilled with the privilege he had brought to Israel in the commandments of Torah. He has no thought that he's delivering to them a yoke of bondage. Far from it; in Deuteronomy 4:6-8 he delights to tell them:

"Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you this day?"

Not everyone was as fortunate or as privileged as those to whom Moses spoke when he said (Deuteronomy 5:2-3): "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today."

And it was when they were called to, "Stand up and praise the Lord your God" that the returnees from exile confessed how good God had been to them down the years—delivering

them from captivity and sustaining them through the awful wilderness. It was in that setting that they said, "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good." (Nehemiah 9:5-13) They weren't thanking God for a yoke that can only accuse and bring death to them!

No wonder rabbi Jacob Neusner reminds us that, for the Jews, the Torah finds its place among the gifts of a gracious God: "We thank Thee, Lord our God...for thy Torah which Thou has taught us, for Thy statutes which Thou has made known to us, for the life of grace and mercy Thou has graciously bestowed on us..." (An Introduction to Judaism, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991, page 5)

In describing halakhah (the authoritative interpretation of Torah to which the pious take heed) he remarks, "When people think of law, they ordinarily imagine a religion for book-keepers, who tote up the good deeds and debit the bad and call the result salvation or damnation, depending on the outcome. But when we speak of life under the halakhah law, we mean life in accord with the halakhah, the rules and regulations of a holy life." (Page 63) It was the way people who were gifted with life and relationship responded to the grace showered on them. [We're aware that the Halakhah of the Pharisees often got in God's way.]

#### **God's gift to Israel but the Torah was serving larger purposes**

Torah was a servant to the Abrahamic promises and those promises while made specifically to Abraham and his physical descendants through Jacob; they were for all the nations. This means the Jewish Torah was not to be seen as serving only Israel; it was a gift of God's grace to Israel which was to result in the blessing of humanity. Note, for example, Genesis 12:2-3; 17:5; 22:18; 26:4. Life with God through Abraham was for every nation under heaven.

Nevertheless, Israel wasn't simply a "tool" to be used by God and cast aside. God loved Israel as he had loved their fathers and he called them to himself rather than some location in a wilderness (Exodus 19:4). He called them that they might enjoy life with him in the here and now and not simply in some distant future. The life that God offered Israel as a gracious gift was profiled in the Torah. The life he offered wasn't wages they earned because they were morally good enough; the life he offered was a relationship in which they lived out the character of the God who freely entered this covenant with them.

So when Leviticus 18:5 said, "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord," God meant what he said. Israel would find life with God within the parameters of the Torah. He would not allow them to live like Egyptians where they'd been and he forbids them to live like Canaanites where they were going (18:1-3). To live as those nations lived wasn't "living" and if it was life Israel wanted, they would have to find it in a relationship with Yahweh. The parameters of that relationship (including forgiveness when sins were committed) were laid out in the Torah which by God's grace, deepens, enriches and purifies their experience of and relationship with God.

The Torah is the commandment that is "unto life" in Romans 7:10 and it was given exclusively to Israel. When Paul makes use of Leviticus 18:5 in both Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12 that is precisely the point he is making. "The man" who does "these things" is the Israelite to whom the Torah was given. The Torah was a specific and exclusive way for life with God for Israel after the flesh. It wasn't meant to be the commandment "unto life" for all nations. [And, of course, Israel despised the covenant and continued to dishonor God so that the covenant became their accuser and judge rather than the place within which they enjoyed life with God. Instead of bringing life to the loving obedient it brought curse and death to an impenitent nation.]

### **The covenantal law was to bring life to and shape the life of Israel.**

Israel hadn't been rescued from Pharaonic slavery only to be put under a more galling and a more enduring one. The law was intended to bring life (Rom 7:10—"I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death").

In a covenant renewal setting (Deut 30:15-20), Moses says to Israel what is typical of his remarks throughout the book:

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life."

In Psalm 19 the psalmist sees the law as reviving the soul and making the simple wise, giving joy, vision, warning and reward (7,8,11). In Psalm 119 the torah makes blameless and pure (1,9), it leads to praise (7), gives pilgrims guidance (19), rebukes arrogance (21), preserves life (25), gives strength (28), ministers grace (29), results in freedom (45), is worthy of trust (86), preserves life (93), identifies the people of God (94), gives enlightenment and wisdom (97-100) and so forth.

The life that came as a result of Israel's lovingly obeying God's law was a gift and not a wage (see Deuteronomy 9:5-6) and it was life as defined within the parameters of the covenantal law which the gracious God gave to Israel. There is no life for the elect outside of covenant!

The life that Israel enjoyed with God under this covenantal law showed itself in blessings that consisted of possession of land, fruits, crops, herds, families, houses, wells, security, joy, emotional and physical health (as well as forgiveness of sins). But while these were part of what Israel understood as "life" with God, they didn't exhaust it. Life with God involved a relationship which existed between God and Israel even in the absence of these blessings.

The relationship Israel had with God was spiritual and the blessings which were enjoyed were not confined to the physical. It didn't matter that the ancients were ignorant of the vastness of the blessings—whatever was in store for them came to them because they were related to the Lord and they would enjoy them in the here and now or hereafter if there was to be a hereafter. The distinction we draw between spiritual and physical is (in the main) groundless, though at times to differentiate them is useful.

But the laws didn't exist simply to provide the needs/wants of Israel; they were there also to teach Israel what to want. Understanding came through asking questions but more wisdom and deeper understanding led them to know which questions to ask. It was important for the people to learn what to do with their goods but it was equally important for them to recognize a priority of goods. The laws were part of Israel's ethical education and enrichment as well as commands to be obeyed if they wanted to be blessed.

It was a gracious gift because it opened their eyes and dismissed their darkness. It was a gracious gift because it shaped their lives, enabling them to know what they should want to want. It was a gracious gift because it had a home attached with it. It was a gracious gift because it was in faithfulness to promises God had made to their fathers.

Frank Crusemann makes the just observation, "Christians traditionally discuss Torah under the broader heading of 'law.' Thus, it (is) often contrasted with 'gospel.' Historically as well as theologically, however, such opposition can only give a distorted picture of the biblical concept of Torah." He goes on to say, "The concept of Torah includes both sides of the Word of God. What systematic theology divides into law and gospel, command and promise (and then often contrasts them) are all contained in Torah."

**The Torah was gospel as well as other things—see Hebrews 4:1-2.**

## The Torah is not of faith

And what can Paul mean by "the Torah (law) is not of faith" (Galatians 3:12)? He can hardly mean that people who observed the Torah were not believers. Hebrews 11 in one long chapter of protest against such a notion. He can hardly mean that the Torah (as written and understood by Israel's finest) didn't call people to trust in God. You can hardly open the psalms without stumbling across the word "trust". The prophets who both interpreted the Torah and called the nation back to it not only took for granted the indispensability of faith, they called the nation and its kings to have faith (Isaiah 7:9; 28:16 are examples).

And when God first offered the Mosaic covenantal Torah to Israel at the foot of mount Sinai it was impossible for them to come to him and say yes to the covenant if they did not have faith. The OT faith terminology is not anything like as prominent as it is in the NT, but it occurs in critical passages and in many places where the terms don't occur the call certainly does. There is no faithfulness without faith. The central crime of Israel in the Exodus days, the Hebrew writer tells us in chapters 3 & 4, was "unbelief". He says they didn't enter the promised land because they had no faith (4:1-2).

So when Paul speaks of a time "before faith came" or when he says, "now that faith has come" (3:23,25) we're not to suppose he meant trust was non-existent prior to Christ. Paul speaks of the era in Jewish experience that preceded the life, death and glorification of the Messiah as "before faith came". "Faith" in this setting is placed over against "the Torah" just as "Spirit" is set over against "flesh" in 4:29. Faith in this setting is not speaking of an individual's faith but an era, a new era that has begun with Christ. This new era is not just another "period of time" but a time when God's redeeming work has entered a new phase marked out by an emphasis on his universal purpose. In this new era the elect are redefined. In the former era the elect were Abraham's flesh and this was confirmed by the Mosaic covenant which was made exclusively with them. The former era was the era of "the flesh" (not in any immoral sense); the era when physical kinship with Abraham through Jacob marked a person out as elect. The era "of faith" (or Spirit) relativists' "flesh" and declares it irrelevant to election in Christ and Abrahamic kinship (3:26-29).

When he says the torah is not of faith he means that as a covenant it belongs with a passing phase of God's redeeming work. He means it isn't part of the new era inaugurated in and through Christ Jesus. The torah is "not of faith" because it didn't embrace all who had or would have the faith of Abraham. In Galatians 3:12 Paul says the torah is not of faith and his biblical support for that claim is Leviticus 18:5 that says, "He who does them shall live by them." In contrast to the Abrahamic covenant that embraced all nations the Mosaic covenant was exclusively for Israel so it held out only to Israel the possibility of covenant life with God. The "he" in Leviticus 18:5 is the "he" to whom the covenant was given and the covenant was given exclusively to Israel.

Whatever came from a faith-filled keeping of the covenant came only to Israel and not to all the nations. The righteousness of the torah was open only to those to whom it was given. See that Paul makes the same claim in Romans 10:4-5. That being the case, since it offered covenant life with God only to the physical kin of Abraham it was not suited to universal redemption. It was "not of faith."

The torah is not "of faith" because it was designed only for Abraham's flesh.

The torah is not "of faith" because it couldn't offer or bring life to all nations.

The torah is not "of faith" because (in this context) "faith" is the new era in Christ, an era that did not exist and could not exist before and part from Jesus who was both the goal and the termination of the Torah unto righteousness (Romans 10:4-5).

## Torah and ageless moral goodness

I'm one of the countless who believe that salvation and life with God begins with, is nourished and completed by the sheer grace of God. Any aspects of Pelagianism or Arminianism that promote notions of self-salvation should be decisively rejected.

I'm also one of many who thinks that evangelicals tend to undermine the ethical element in God's redeeming and blessing activity. There's too much talk about "God's free forgiveness" (there isn't too much of "God's free forgiveness," just too much talk about it) and too little about the character of the life God brings and means to bring. The bottom line with God is life and not simply forgiveness when we sin or a pain-free post-mortem existence; it's life together with God and one another he has in mind; life that is lived in the image of God; life that is characterized in us by a love of truth, joy, goodness, kindness and holiness.

Moral richness and uprightness isn't something tacked on to life with God it's a constituent element of life itself.

I for one am desperately in need of that and feel in my bones that an unceasing diet of "sugar" has hurt me. Self-righteous and hard-hearted moralists haven't helped me either, but I'm sure that a more balanced message down the years about God's holistic work of blessing and redemption would have resulted in my being a better man than I am today.

F.W. Robertson was on target when he said, "The sacrifice of Christ does not alter God's Will: it does not make sin a trifle: it does not make it safer to commit offenses. It does not abrogate, but declares God's law." I think the "Sermon on the Mount" will support that view.

The Sermon on the Mount can and should be read at several levels. There is Christ sitting on a mountainside instructing his followers. The thought of mount Sinai with its Torah (instruction, law, guidance, profiling of God's people) is probably in the background. And so is mount Gerizim with its "blesseds" (see Deuteronomy 11:29 with 28:1-14). The Master profiles the people of God in new (but not unknown) terms and pronounces blessings on them that stand in contrast to the blessings that rang out from Gerizim.

His followers are made distinct from the crowds (5:1) as Israel was made distinct from the crowd of nations that also belonged to God (Exodus 19:5). As Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (thus serving God by serving the nations) so the followers of Christ were the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13,14). Their response to God and their good deeds were to have a salutary effect on the world and bring their Father glory (5:13-16) so that the world might be blessed.

Who they were and how they were to live their lives out before God was of critical importance. The Torah was not being abolished nor was its goal to be jettisoned. (Compare Matthew 23:2.)

Whatever else it might include, Matthew 5:17-20 dealt with ethical response and Jesus said he hadn't come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. In a later discussion dealing with ethical response the Master again made use of the "law and the prophets" phrase when he insisted that loving God and our neighbor as ourselves was the core of "the torah" and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

The Master had no intention of undermining the moral foundations of life with God; he uncovered them rather than burying them (as his, "But I say unto you..." in Matthew 5:21-48 indicates). The Master nowhere gives the impression that life with God is without ethical and moral content, or is the result of some mechanical transfer of our sins to Christ's personal credit and the transfer of Christ's personal righteousness to our own credit. Because God's holy grace could have it no other way, there is no life between him and sinners unless homage is paid to his holiness and righteousness. There can no fellowship between light and darkness and no

agreement between Christ and Belial. This means there can be, in fact, no reconciliation between a human and God if that human will not acknowledge what the cross insists on. Those who have life with God in Jesus Christ are those who pay homage to the righteousness and holiness of God manifested in Jesus Christ. They pay homage to that cross-work by entering into union with the now-living Christ.

Atonement theories and stresses which minimize or hide the Bible's full-blooded call for that homage are not helpful. So seriously did Christ take the moral authority of the Torah that he had stern things to say of those who minimize "even the least" of its commands (5:19). Rather than set the cross of Christ against the Torah's moral authority we ought to be fully aware that the cross highlights it. All this he said to his own disciples.

The moral content of the Jewish Torah was the furthering of God's agenda in Genesis 18:19 (see below) which means moral transformation is part and parcel of the redeeming process rather than merely some grateful response to what God had already completed.

### **The Torah & God's Ethical Agenda**

In G.K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" story *The Blue Cross*, the priest-detective is talking to Flambeau, a famous thief, who is pretending to be a fellow-priest because he means to steal the silver cross with the blue sapphire which Father Brown has in his care. They're sitting on an old wooden bench on a lonely heath. The sun is just disappearing and the starlit sky is bathed in the blue and green of evening while they debate about reason and the nature of things. The sham priest thinks there might be other worlds where reason and truth are not as reason and truth are in this world, but Brown insists that truth is always truth and concludes with this: "Reason and justice grip the remotest and loneliest star. Look at those stars. Don't they look as if they were single diamonds and sapphires? Well you can imagine any mad botany or geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think the moon is a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don't fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the slightest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board, 'Thou shalt not steal.' "

I'd like to make the point that what the Torah was after, what all "moral law" is and was after, remains the same--the alignment of the heart with God. It doesn't matter if we're nomads living in tents or ancient Scythians living in wagons; it doesn't matter if we live in rain-forests or an arctic wilderness, whether we're 21st century moderns or 6,000 B.C. dwellers on the Tiber--what is grand in living, what we call "real life" has always been and will continue to be the same. Of course it will be fleshed out differently in each individual but it will still be recognizable as the will of the one God for the one human family. We still recognize moral grandeur as the true greatness, as distinct from political, economic or military greatness. We allow the term "great" to be applied to Herod or Alexander or Cyrus but we know we're using it in a seriously limited way.

The truths of moral goodness didn't begin with the Mosaic covenant and they didn't end with it. Whatever the newness or peculiarities of the Mosaic covenant, its ethical thrust was simply furthering God's ethical goals of earlier days and it does the same to this day.

In a passage that is rich in theological content we hear what God had in mind for Israel's future. "Then the Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For 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 18:17-19)

The prime mover in the text, of course, is God. It is what he is about to do. It is God who has chosen Abraham, it is God who has promised and will bring about what he has promised. To deny that is to violate the very words of the text.



But Abraham himself is involved in the fulfillment of the world-wide blessing. God's doing requires from Abraham a creative response. Abraham has been chosen by God "so that" he will direct his descendants "to keep the way of the Lord". There is an ethical element in the purposes of God. That "way of the Lord" is seen in Abraham's children "doing what is right and just". And that is where the Torah comes in. What we see at Sinai is no brand new ethical program; it is the "way of the Lord" being fleshed out in the doing of righteousness and justice.

This text connects that keeping of "the way of the Lord" in righteousness and justice with God's fulfilling his purpose of universal blessing and salvation. The first "so that" relates to God's choice of Abraham ("so that he will direct his children...") and the closing "so that" relates to the fulfillment of what God promised Abraham (multitudes of descendants in world-wide salvation). Other texts look in other directions but this text says God chose Abraham so that he will shape the ethical life of his descendants in righteousness so that world redemption will be brought about.

The life that God's offers humans is a relationship with himself --no relationship, no life. Because God is who and what he is that life cannot be one in which darkness is loved and cherished and light is despised. God doesn't say, "I will give you life with me as a reward if you will only live uprightly." As if to say one is to some degree distinct from the other. Light can't have fellowship with darkness, Christ and Belial cannot live in union. There can be no life with God unless the heart is willing to pay homage to the righteousness which is in God.

This is what "moral law" has always been about. At it's highest and richest, to live morally is to live in the image of God and that's what the Torah was about. What is true in the Torah was true before the Torah came along and is true to this moment.

It's no surprise then to hear Christ affirm the continuing validity of the Torah (and the exposition of it given by the prophets). Nor does it surprise us to hear the whole New Testament corpus use the Torah to call Christians to live morally upright. New Testament writers followed their Master in this.

Paul had been accused of undermining the moral aspect of life by his preaching of justification by faith in Jesus Christ (note Romans 3:8; 6:1). He strenuously denies this and insists that his teaching upholds the Torah (Romans 3:31) and brings about the "righteous requirement" (NJKV) of the Torah (Romans 8:4). He insisted that the ethical thrust embodied in the Torah was of central importance to Christians. Notice this in Romans 13:8-10.

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love on another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." Note the reason he gives for the continued debt to love each other, for he who loves...has fulfilled the Torah. What has this for to do with Christians? Love one another because that's how you fulfill the Torah, he teaches. Why should they be concerned about fulfilling the Torah? Obviously it must have moral authority to which Christians are to submit themselves. Paul would have thought us more than a little naive if we had said to him, "Since Gentiles aren't under the law of Moses, you can't connect them with the Jewish Torah in this way."

If we should say that "law" in this text doesn't have the Old Testament Torah in mind, but has some general moral law in view, we'd need to pay attention to 13:9, where Paul quotes three commandments directly from the Decalogue, and as a summary, Leviticus 19:18.

I think it's important for reasons I'll make clear later that we allow the "law" throughout Romans to be the Jewish Torah, but at this point it doesn't really matter since Paul has earlier insisted (Romans 2:14-15, 26) that true morality is the same whether in the form of the Jewish covenantal Torah or not. Some Gentiles who didn't, of course, have the Torah were doing the works of Torah and even had the things of the Torah "written on their hearts."

This means that when Paul quotes the Jewish Torah he is quoting something that is relevant to the entire human family. Of course the Torah had a covenantal form and that

covenant was made with no people but Israel, but that's not the same as saying the moral truth inscribed in the Torah was relevant only to Israel. The New Testament use of this moral truth shows that it speaks to us all. Even in the prophets, when the nations are addressed (see sections in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and places in Daniel), the moral teaching of the Torah is laid on them. We have abundant teaching in Genesis that moral truth written into the Torah was known and binding long before Sinai.

The book of James (written to both Christian and non-Christian Jews) is saturated with the moral truths of the Torah; and it insists that a man can't pick his way through the Torah's moral authority, obeying what he likes and ignoring the rest. That, says James (2:8-11), would be to make yourself a judge over the whole moral law (he quotes from the Jewish Torah). Peter writes to Jewish Christians ("the Diaspora" in numerous provinces) and opens this ethical call with Leviticus (see 1:16) and supplements it from Old Testament writings as he moves on through the book.

Let me repeat, the moral content of the Jewish Torah was the furthering of God's agenda in Genesis 18:19. That agenda had as part of the saving work of God the moral shaping and transforming of Abraham's descendants into God's image. If that's true, it means that the Torah was not a moral code that stood over against people as an obstacle.

God's ethical agenda was the creation of a redeemed people. Whom he foreknew he foreordained to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Restoring them to the image of God was part of the saving process. To have people reconciled to God at that moment back at the cross misses the point. It has people at-one with God whose hearts are not realigned with God. It's to make reconciliation something bank clerks do when they transfer one column of figures over to another. The grace of God that saves comes transforming, initially and continuously (Titus 2:11-15).

#### **Life With God As An Alignment of the Heart**

To remove the moral and ethical element from life with God as if it were something added on, something expected "now that we have life" is to miss the nature of life. To make it merely a "condition" to be met so that we might have life is to miss the point from another end. Of course it's legitimate to say that moral uprightness is to be expected in response to God's gift of life and it's correct to say, "If you don't pursue holiness you won't see God." But to say these things as if they were the whole story leaves out too much truth.

To "know" God is eternal life. To have our hearts in tune with God's heart is life and not merely a response to it or a condition to be met to get it. To be at-one with God, to be related to him is to live. Not to love, not to be reidentified with God is not to live. It is to be away from home.

As Luke 15 tells it, the prodigal son is "dead" and "lost". This is not only his own view, we're expressly told that it is his father's view. The boy's later penitence in no way generated or earned the grace in the father's heart, in fact, it was the memory of the father and his grace that led him to "come to himself." It nevertheless remains true that the boy was dead and lost until his heart was realigned with his father. The return to the father was not simply a "condition to be met" if he wanted life nor was it the appropriate response to life already restored. Though these are truths they miss the point that life is relationship, life is reconciliation with his father. To be reconciled to his father is not simply the way to life, it is life. To have one heart with the father is to be at-one with him, it is to be at home with him, it is to be received by him and to receive him.

To "return" to the father doesn't make the father gracious, he is that while the prodigal is wallowing in selfish stupidity. To return to the father, to be reidentified with him, changes the father's judgment of the child. The always gracious father insisted that the boy was dead but is now alive; he was lost but now is found. And this is true, not simply because the son "met the

condition" for life, but because life is to be with the father. There is no life without being with the father and there is no being with the father unless the heart is realigned with the father!

If the boy had returned with a swagger, heart as vicious, inwardly as hostile as ever--had he done that he wouldn't have been home. He would just have moved the location of his pig-pen. He comes home in holy penitence and life begins for him not simply because he is now behaving appropriately but because there is no life without being at-one with the father and moral realignment is part of what it means to be at-one with the father.

### **The Torah's Place in Spiritual Realignment with the Holy Father**

Any man who thinks he has merited life with God is a fool! Any man who doesn't know that life with God is a gift of sheer grace and mercy is completely blind and has been robbed of true peace. Anyone who thinks his obedience somehow makes God his debtor or makes it easier for God to save him rather than some other knows nothing of the grandeur of the gospel. The ground of all our hope is the free, gracious, creative and redemptive work of God done on our behalf, culminating in his coming as Jesus Christ to live, die and live again. All of this I hold to be true.

Not a bit of it comes into conflict with this truth: our spiritual realignment with God is an aspect of his redeeming work and it is experienced in us and not apart from us.

Life is being related to God. It is a dynamic, continuing relationship. It is a relationship which can't exist if our hearts are aligned with Belial rather than Christ. This relationship is more than a single moment's decision--it is a life together with God. And that life is sustained and enriched by God's gift of grace, the law of God.

In Luke 10:25-37 an expert in the Torah came to Christ asking him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The Master's response was, "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?"

The teacher responds by joining Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and the Lord says to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and live."

The man wanted to know what he "must do" to inherit eternal life but it apparently never entered his mind that in loving God and his neighbor he would "earn" eternal life. He didn't see "doing" as part of some mathematical scheme good deeds out-weighting bad deeds=eternal life. And he wasn't alone in this.

It seems like everyone in the Bible thought there was something to "do" in order to be saved or gain eternal life. This is especially clear in Luke's writings. In 3:10-14 the people come asking John what they should "do"? In Acts 2:37 people wanted to know what they must "do". Saul wanted to know what he must "do" and the risen Christ told him he would be told what to "do". The angel told Cornelius that he would be told what he must "do" and the man repeats that to Peter. The Philippian jailer wants to know what he must "do" and the rich young ruler comes to Christ, wanting to know what he must "do". And whoever responded to such a question, whether it was the Master or an authorized representative, refused to treat it as implying a "meritorious works" mind set.

When the teacher of Torah asked what he had to "do" he didn't get a sermon saying, "Now, that's your first mistake. You can't 'do' anything to inherit eternal life. That's part of the trouble with you Torah people, you're always going on about 'doing'."

Not at all! The Christ asks him what the Torah taught he must do and the man gave the correct answer. The Master didn't contradict him; he confirmed the man's answer and insisted, "Do this and you will live." It's important that people receive assurance about their salvation with God but the way to give them assurance is not to deny their need to respond to God. They must be taught that they do not save themselves but the way to do that is not to teach them that obedience is in no way related to that salvation. They most certainly do have to obey him!

Christ does not deny that the man can inherit life with God through obedience to the Torah he insists that loving obedience that accords with the Torah is the way to life (10:28, note also 10:37b).

Had the man said, "Eternal life is a gift of God and I need not do anything to inherit it true or false?" Christ would have said it was false. Had the man come saying, "I know I have to 'do enough' to make God gracious toward me and to inherit eternal life and I'm wondering what that involves?" Christ might well have taken the time to instruct him that all the obedience in the world would still leave him an unprofitable servant and in need of grace to cover his sins.

When a rich young man came asking what he had to do to get eternal life, the Christ said (Matthew 19:17), "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments." We can speak all the truth we wish about salvation and life rising out of the sheer grace of God but we mustn't speak as if Jesus himself were ignorant of the truth we know. All the teaching of grace and God's redemptive work in Christ changes nothing of what Christ said about obeying the commandments if you want to enter life. If this young man is excluded from eternal life it is because he will not follow the Torah.

I've been assured more than once down the years that Christ was simply going along with the young man's legalism for a while in order to convict him from another angle. The story was that Christ was thinking something like, "This young man thinks he merits life by good works. The truth is, it's impossible to enter life by keeping the commandments, but I'm going to speak as if it's possible." At which point he says, "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

But all of this is needless conjecture generated by certain theological perspectives. Talk about "doing enough" to have life or "earning" life is what we bring to the text; it doesn't appear to be in it. Jesus Christ believed that in the absence of obedience to God there could be no life. Nobody knew better than he that humans had life with God because of the sheer grace and generosity of the holy Father. Nevertheless, he still insists that this young man keep the Torah. "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments." (Compare Matthew 23:2.)

But that business about "keeping the Torah" if you want life is what unsettles us. It keeps jarring us with the ring of "legalism". Well, maybe we need to allow the scriptures to shape our theology rather than have our theology to shape the biblical witness. I think I recognize that there will always be something circular about our understanding of scripture; it's nevertheless true that by God grace we need to keep our reasons in line with the obvious import of a mass of texts. A major contributor to our unease, I suspect, arises because we have misread Paul for a very long time. (More about that later.)

Briefly, then, how does the Torah fit in with the realignment of our souls with God? The Torah as we find it in the scriptures and not as some abstraction, ripped away from its biblical soil, rises out of God's saving grace; and is God's saving grace expressed in Torah form. The initial moment of rescue is not the end of the matter; it is only the beginning point of a relationship which is saving in nature. That relationship requires a heart that is reidentified with (the image of) God and that means it is a heart that pays homage to God's holiness and righteousness as reflected in the Torah.

To offset what is a plain insistence on human submission to God some make it all a matter of "trust" with obedience following when you already have life through trust. Not only is "trust" watered down to a mental concept, a theological way of seeing salvation, this approach ignores the mass of scriptures that explicitly use the word "obedience" (and synonyms) when speaking of human response to God's gracious and free gift of eternal life.

Not only is such a view of "trust" foreign to scripture (see Hebrews 11 as one long illustration of what trust entails), we New Testament people talk about "trust" as if originated

in the New Testament. Just take a look at a concordance and see how unfounded this is. And see how the notion of trust occurs in critically important texts like Genesis 15:6; Isaiah 7:9; 8:17; 28:16.

Finally, obedience is not only "unto" life, it isn't only in response to life, it is life. Life is living in loyal love toward God and that's where the Torah comes in.

#### Notes

Expository Lectures on the Corinthians, Henry S. King & Co., London, 1876, page 156

I'm not suggesting here that obedience to moral law is a mechanical reproduction of some abstract moral concepts. Nor do I wish to suggest that "moral law" is some eternal, self-existing, independent-of-God, reality. God is the source and shape of all that we call morally grand. Without him it doesn't exist.

Chesterton: First published in 1911, published in 1950 by Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, pages 24-25

See R.W.L. Moberly's brief but really helpful discussion on "faith" in The Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, Volume 1:427-433, Paternoster Press, United Kingdom, 1997.

## Torah and an Eye for an Eye

In another piece I said that the Mosaic covenantal Torah originated with and served the gracious Lord's purposes. In this section I want to look at some specific laws, their nature, purpose and application, to show what is true as a whole is true as it's worked out in specifics. If we read the Torah as a legalist's handbook we've missed its tone and spirit by a million miles. What immediately follows is written to show that the Torah is utterly unlike the kind of law a potential legalist would need to support his legalism.

A writer, justly recognized for his sensitiveness and graciousness, was certainly wrong when he used Exodus 21:24, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" to characterize a legalist and vengeful spirit. He said of it that it's a quick, sure way to a sightless and toothless world. This is not what the Torah in general is about nor what that text in particular has in mind.

When you think of a "legalist" you think of someone who pores over the minutiae of life and scripture, trying to match them up; you think of someone who has to have every "t" crossed and every "i" dotted; you think of someone who scrutinizes his life and the lives of others, not like a nurse tending to someone who's sick to make them well, but with the intensity of Javert, the tormented policeman in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, looking for law-breakers in order to punish them (even if the law-breaker is himself).

When you think of a "legalist" you think of someone who insists that every matter of the law is of equal importance and should be given equal time and concern ("If it's a law, it's as much a law as any other law!"); you think of someone for whom everything must not only be spelled out with precision, it must be followed in slavish detail. When we think of a legalist we won't think of someone simply on the basis of a number of independent decisions, we'll see (or think we see) a pattern of thought, a "way" of responding.

There's a cut and dried approach to life, a definite right/wrong about everything, a rigid consistency which tends to nurture flintiness because, you see, there's little or no room for doubt or dithering--the facts are what the facts are! Little nuances are passed over, extenuating circumstances are minimized or completely ignored because they only muddy the waters; there's no giving the benefit of the doubt because if we confess there's something we can't nail down with precision, that's the thin end of the wedge. Before we know it we'll be dithering on a host of others things so everything's colored with the same brush. Legalists only rarely dither

and when they do, it's only until they have time to find a verse that settles the matter one way or another.

First, the Torah doesn't give enough answers to be a legalist's document. Second, the Torah knows nothing of a legalist's flinty consistency. Third, and as a consequence, people are left in many situations to work out their own response of faith to God. Fourth, the commandments in the Torah encourage and call for an extraordinary measure of generosity; something that doesn't sit well in a legalistic framework. Fifth, all the laws in the Torah are important but they're not all equally important.

### **There Aren't Enough Answers in the Torah**

Here's a question: Why were judges chosen in the Old Testament? Part of the answer is that so everyone would receive justice if and when disputes arose. Yes, but why didn't they simply go to the written text and let it settle the matter? Because there aren't enough verses in the world, spelled out with exhaustive precision, to settle every dispute. Judges--who loved the whole community as well as each individual--were needed to give a definitive interpretation of the Torah. This means the Torah wasn't an exhaustive blueprint! See Deuteronomy 1:9-18; 17:8-13 and elsewhere.

No one pretends that the legal material in the covenantal Torah is exhaustive. There can never be enough rules to cover every eventuality or deal with all aspects of life. Herbert Danby, in introducing the Mishnah to English readers said this (xvii-xviii): "Since written laws cannot anticipate all possible contingencies, or embrace every detail, or deal in advance with each possible case, it can be assumed that, in applying the Mosaic code to daily life and to the Temple worship, to domestic relations and trade and to the administration of justice, a multitude of usages arising out of practical necessity or convenience or experience became part of the routine of observance of the code..." 1 E.P. Sanders said in his Jewish Law From Jesus To The Mishnah, "In some ways the biblical laws regarding food and purity almost cry out for extension and clarification." 2

You only have to glance at Israel's laws to be confronted with a mass of unanswered questions. "You shall not work on the Sabbath" seems simple enough until you ask, "Precisely what constitutes work?" Precisely when does healthy desire become coveting? Is flirting with and/or kissing someone's wife the same as committing "adultery"? Is it stealing to haggle for and take more than you believe an object is worth? Punishment was to be carried out according to the nature of the crime, but how was that to be determined? The law said a rapist had to marry the virgin and never divorce her but what if she didn't want to marry him? At what precise moment did the Sabbath begin or end? Who disposed of the ashes of the altar of burnt offering? How and where was it to be done? It was forbidden to reap the "edges" of the fields. What was left in the edges was for the poor and the alien; but what exactly was an "edge" and who were the "poor"? There are precise answers for none of these questions and hundreds more.

We find illustrations of new laws having to be introduced to cover situations not covered by earlier legislation. Property and inheritance laws were laid out with males in mind, but what about females? What if the family had no boys? See Numbers 27:1-11. The daughters of Zelophehad came with that complaint and Moses had to take it to the Lord. A new law was introduced but it raised another question which required another new law. See Numbers 36:1-9 and 15:32-36. Ezra and Nehemiah, who wanted people to be obedient to the Torah introduced new measures to that end.

### **The Torah wasn't an exhaustive blueprint!**

### **The Torah Knows Nothing of a Flinty Consistency**

Then there's the lack of rigid consistency in the writings of or connected with the Torah. Nehemiah was angry because his people were dishonoring God and ignoring the Torah. Angry

at the traders who wanted to trade in the city on the Sabbath, he closed the gates and set guards to keep the merchants out. He saw no problem in having the guards working on the Sabbath to keep people from working on the Sabbath. See Nehemiah 13:15-22.

Leviticus 10 speaks of Nadab and Abihu being slain by God because they violated his law about "strange fire". What precisely is involved might not be clear; what's clear is that the two men violated the will of God and God slew them. It would be easy to take this text and make it a hermeneutical grid by which to judge not only the whole Torah but the God of the Torah; however even before the chapter is finished we're given a different picture.

Aaron and his two remaining sons violate the Torah concerning the peace offering which was to be eaten by the priests in a holy place. When Moses first hears of it he is incensed but when Aaron explains to him that they broke the law to honour God, Moses is pacified. What exactly Aaron meant is something of a problem but he satisfied Moses that what they had done remained within the larger stream of God's will.

In 2 Samuel 6:1-11 we have the famous case of Uzzah who was slain by God when he touched the ark (see Numbers 4:15). We could use this text to stress the severity of God (and it will bear that weight, because God did indeed strike Uzzah dead), but if we have an eye to see it, God was just as merciful as he was decisive in judgment. It wasn't only Uzzah who had sinned; the whole enterprise headed up by David and his priestly companions was sinful from the beginning. Why didn't God slay the whole procession of people, including David, since every step they took was contrary to the Torah which said the ark was to be carried on the shoulders of the priests? So the very text which proclaims God's awful severity also proclaims his mercy. Uzzah breaks the law and dies; David and the rest break the law and don't die.

And take a look at Numbers 12 and 16. When Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses, disputing his authority, an angry God shows mercy in judging Miriam. In chapter 16 when Korah and his companions rebel against the authority of Moses and Aaron, God not only destroys them, he destroys two hundred and fifty leaders who were implicated in the whole matter. And subsequent to that he destroys more than fourteen thousand who refuse to enter into the spirit of that righteous judgment.

And to complicate the matter, Hezekiah enlists Levites and priests who were not purified according to the Torah enlists them to do priestly work and offer sacrifice. God destroyed Korah for wanting to do what he later allows Levites to do priestly work. See 2 Chronicles 30:15-20 and note the joy in the whole experience of a renewed Passover. How God applies the Torah can help us in interpreting it. (See it developed in [Franky and Jennifer](#).)

The Torah specified that adulterers and murderers were to be stoned and yet David is left alive despite committing both crimes. The Torah forbids anyone to eat the shewbread but the priests and yet a high-priest gives it to David and his men and did no wrong.

It's worth noting that when Jesus uses that incident in Matthew 12:1-8 in his defense of his disciples, he doesn't claim that he or David or the high-priest was exercising "executive privilege". He tells the critics that if they had had the heart that understood Hosea 6:6 they wouldn't have condemned his disciples. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice" must have explanatory value when we turn to the laws in the Torah. Christ says here that they could and should have known better.

And, you'll have noted that this "inconsistency" isn't only about cultic matters, it involves moral transgression and what God did or did not do about it. The Torah doesn't call for a legalistic response because the God of the Torah is not a legalist. We see this variation of response to transgression in our own families. See it developed in [Franky and Jennifer; Torah for the Family](#).

But how can we explain such variations in God's response? Why don't all adulterers die irrespective of their rank? Why don't all thieves die and not just Achan? Why don't all rebels against legitimate authority die as Korah did?

### **The Torah Leaves People to Work Out their Own Response of Faith to God**

There are limits to be placed on that heading but it's still true that the Torah leaves room for people to exercise various options. Many of the punishments laid down in the Torah didn't have to be slavishly followed. Take the case of an "eye for an eye". The injunction was not promoting revenge, it was limiting punishment and ensuring that the injured party would be taken seriously.

One who lost his hand wasn't to think he had the right to remove his assailant's head. Losing a foot didn't give him leave to remove the other person's two legs. On the other hand, the person disabled or maimed was a person, and was to be taken seriously. Justice was to be done and a penalty commensurate with the nature of the injury was to be carried out if the situation called for it.

This "eye for an eye" text is part of a covenant Torah that urges forgiveness and generosity (more on that later) so we're not to see it as promoting vengefulness. The passage goes on to tell us that a servant who lost his eye could be given his freedom in place of his eye (Exodus 21:24-27) so we know Israel isn't bound to slavishly follow the letter. A reading of the whole section illustrates that compensation rather than "wound for wound" can be pursued. Note 21:28-31. (And we need to note that a musician's hand is relatively more important on a commercial, social scale than, say, .....?)

But more to the point, the punishments laid down in many texts are optional, not absolutely demanded. Exodus 21:24 isn't demanding that the victim insist on punishment! The passage limits the punishment that can be administered even while it takes into account the communal rights of the one hurt but the one who is hurt isn't required to demand the eye or even compensation.

Leviticus 19:18 says they were not to bear a grudge and were to love each other as they loved themselves. This certainly means they didn't have to demand an eye. What if they wanted to say, "An apology is quite enough," and got it? What if the sheep is stolen and the owner is content not to demand a replacement (Exodus 22:12)? What if the girl who was raped doesn't want to marry the rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29)?

What if Jacob in a bizarre accident killed Barak, his lifelong and most devoted friend? What if instead of running to a refuge city he ran to Barak's house (to his parents and seven giant brothers), beside himself with grief and poured out the whole story? What if the bereaved family knew of the love these two had for each other and grieved not only for the loss of the son/brother but grieved over Jacob's loss? What if the whole village knew the truth and entered into the grief, and the judges saw the affair as one deep tragedy with no one to "blame"? Exile in a refuge city wouldn't be required. See Deuteronomy 19:1-13; Number 35:9-15 and elsewhere. [We should learn from this that biblical texts deal with specific situations and take many things for granted. The law concerning refuge cities and (alleged) accidental killings completely ignores all deaths that are not in dispute.]

Take the case of the adulterer. Adulterers were to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 19:22; Leviticus 20:10) and yet there isn't one person in the Old Testament who was stoned to death for adultery. At some point divorce was introduced based on adultery (as witnessed by Isaiah 50:1 and Jeremiah 3:8, compare also Deuteronomy 24:1-5). Obviously the death penalty wasn't carried out every time adultery occurred. It appears that the death penalty is open to the offended but not demanded. The case of Joseph (in Matthew 1:18-19) and the woman Jesus dealt with in John 8 add to the picture.



To be sure, the above raises other questions and there are issues involved that need nuanced, but what is the general drift of all this? I'm wanting to say that in many instances the passages assume that the "sufferer" may want to exercise his or her rights. The Torah doesn't demand that they take everything to court and insist on reparation. Those sinned against are allowed to forgive; they're allowed to be generous and dismiss the matter as something best set aside. There would be situations where the crime would have deeper level ramifications for the community, as well as the individual, and this would have to be worked out, but there is no nurturing of revenge or cultivation of a litigious spirit in the Torah.

The Torah has none of the marks of a legalistic document. It knows nothing of a flinty absolutism and it certainly doesn't promote a cold consistency which becomes a slave to the letter of the law. In it and behind it, giving it its spirit and thrust is a Lord of holy love and compassion who would want Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:7 to be taken seriously. "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"

### **The Torah Nurtures Generosity**

It isn't unusual to hear New Testament people say things like, "The law's demand falls below the obligation grace feels." Depending on what, precisely, is meant by that, there's some truth in it. But what if the Torah is God's grace expressed? To make what the covenantal Torah calls for something other than "the obligation grace feels" is completely false. (Compare Titus 2:11-15.)

And in the main, the specific statement is false. In practice, at least, Israel's "legalistic" system of giving outstrips much of what we see under a "grace" obligation. Paul will not only make Christ's giving the foundational motivation for Christian giving, he appeals to Old Testament texts on giving (see 2 Corinthians 8:9). That bad old "legalistic" system is used by the apostle of grace for instruction and inspiration for Christian giving!

The specified "tenth" was only the beginning of Israel's generosity to priests, one another (and to aliens). There were interest free loans, there were crops left unharvested, there was fruit not gathered in, there were firstlings (animals and crops) offered in sacrifice or redeemed with money, there was the redemption of their firstborn children which cost money, there was the feeding of animals belonging to others, there was the liberal giving of goods to the slave at the end of his seven year stint, there was the remission of debt and return of property in the Jubilee year and the remission of debts in the Sabbatical year, and there was the leaving of crops for the poor on the Sabbatical year. 3

The spirit and tone of the instruction in Deuteronomy 15:7-10 is pervasive throughout the Torah. "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought, 'The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,' so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing...Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart." All this is echoed in 1 & 2 Corinthians where Paul will speak of Christians giving as God has prospered them and giving cheerfully. In principle, there was nothing new about the nature of Christian giving—it was based on principles already taught in the Torah.

It isn't only the generosity of the giving that is striking, it's the motivation behind it all. In "liberally" giving goods to the departing slave they are to "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today." (Deuteronomy 15:14-15) God's own generosity and kindness is the basis and model for Israel's response. This means that Israel's ethical and moral response is as much an obligation to grace as the Christian's. Certainly the new manifestation of God's grace in Christ was grander than

what went before, but it was nevertheless the grace of the same one true God. The truth is, in the Torah, the call for Israel to give generously doesn't exist without the truth that God has already graciously acted on Israel's behalf. To characterize anything in the Torah as legalistic is sheer ignorance. 4

This nurturing of generosity goes beyond the very important matter of giving money and goods. We've noticed it takes matters to the heart of a person. On the basis of their relationship to God and their neighbor, grudges are forbidden (Leviticus 19:17-18), shrewd self-interest is censured, tightfistedness and hard-hearted attitudes are outlawed (Deuteronomy 15:7-9). Personal differences are to be sidelined in order to show kindness (Deuteronomy 22:1-3); the disabled are not to be mistreated (Leviticus 19:14), gossip is frowned on and everything that threatens your neighbors' life is to be avoided (Leviticus 19:16; compare Romans 13:10).

And if we think all these things were to be carried out as if life were a long, grim slog, that too misses the mark. Catering for the needy and the vulnerable was to be done in the spirit of glad rejoicing or at least with a sense of cheerful contentment. See Deuteronomy 15:18; 16:10-14 and note the conclusion of 16:15.

#### Torah's Laws Are Not of Equal Importance

It's one of the failings of the legalist spirit that it flattens all God's commandments, it destroys the distinction between what is important, more important and most important. Part of the reason for this is the misguided notion that it's demanded by a true piety that is shaped by scripture and takes scripture seriously.

But it's precisely because we don't take scripture seriously that we make all commandments of equal importance. If we took scripture seriously we'd accept the word of Christ that there are "more important" and less important matters in the Torah (Matthew 23:23). We'd accept the word of Christ when he speaks of "the least" of Torah's commands and "the greatest" (Matthew 22:34-40).

No one has the right to reject even the least of God's commands (Matthew 5:19-22, and compare Deuteronomy 4:2; 5:32; 12:32) but it's unhealthy and it ignores a clear biblical witness to deny the priority of some commands over others.

To place the law which forbids non-priests to eat the shewbread on the same level with the command forbidding idolatry is misguided. To despise the law about shewbread is to despise the Lord who gave it, but if that law needs to be reverently by-passed in some exceptional circumstances to honor God, then it should be (and was with Christ's approval). But one couldn't reverently by-pass the command to worship and serve only the Lord. Some truths were "moral imperatives" without which there could be no life with God and others (like rules for gathering manna) could come and go because they existed for a particular and passing purpose. The moral authority behind all the commands, God himself, doesn't come and go but some of the specific commands he lays down serve their purpose and become obsolete in the sense that they are no longer binding.

This calls for reverent and rigorous study and reflection but what's strange about that? We have to prioritize our ethical and moral responsibilities if we want to live a normal life. "Things" are less important than "people". Love doesn't always respond in the same way to similar situations. While we're fixing a leaking roof (a matter of real importance, no doubt) and our child gets seriously hurt, we leave the roof and work with the child. As long as the child demands our attention the roof is left unattended. We wouldn't dream of debating whether the roof job was more important than the child's situation. Life confirms what the Torah everywhere insists on.

The Torah has none of the marks of a legal code. No part of it is, or is a sure way to, a "legalistic system of works". The reverse is the truth!

1. The Mishnah, Oxford University Press, 1987

2. SCM Press, London, 1990, page 136

3. Gordon McConville's Law and Theology in Deuteronomy, JSOT Press, Sheffield, England, 1984 is a rich resource here. His treatment of this whole area is not only eye-opening, it's inspiring and convicting. He characterizes Israel's giving as gracious "self denial" (page 17) in the face of God's prior grace and goes on to say this: "Just as the creditor may not claim that he might consider his legitimate right with regard to the debtor, so the owner of the firstlings may not claim what seems to be his right in relation to his beast...we have noticed that such self-denial in the face of apparent rights is a theme that underlies all the laws of Deuteronomy." (page 96) It is not a devotional book!

4. It's worth stressing here that Israel's generosity is not a "secular" humaneness it's an expression of their relationship to Yahweh and is part of his overarching purpose for the world.

## **Torah and the heart set free**

If the OT Torah wasn't an exhaustive blueprint, spelling out every step believers were to take, how were they to know how to obey God? Maybe part of the answer is that they did what Christians do every day of their lives; they "winged" it. The first issue, always the first issue, was this: did Yahweh have the believer's heart? If he didn't, it wouldn't make a bit of difference if there had been an exhaustive blueprint for every thought or deed. But if he had the believer's heart, the rest could be worked out to God's glory and honor because that's what the servant would be bent on giving God—glory and honor.

The freeing of the heart

Yes, yes, very pretty, but if there's no exhaustive blueprint then everything is up for grabs. This isn't true and what's more we know it isn't true. Within the parameters of some foundational, non-negotiable truths that are made known to us, we work out how to live with our families, friends, societies and even enemies. We don't have to have a specific answer to every ethical question to know the direction we are to travel.

Just as important as the necessary information, there is the shape of the heart, there is the love for the family, and there is the moral and emotional commitment to our fellows. The hunger to please, the desire to be of service, the sense of gracious obligation that comes with the relationship all that feeds on the basic and profound truths, and finds new ways to serve when new situations bring new responsibilities.

So it isn't true that "everything is up for grabs" if there is no exhaustive blueprint. There are the parameters which have been given to us and there is the devoted heart that seeks to honor God and bless the neighbor within the scope of those parameters. We hear this from Paul in Romans 13:10: "Love does no harm to its neighbor." He doesn't give us an exhaustive discourse on how love will react in every possible situation because love will not always express itself in the same fashion. He does make one grand insistence: love will never seek the harm of a neighbor.

He makes the same point at greater length in Galatians 5:13-26 where the issue is the abuse of moral freedom. In essence he tells them: "If anyone is living in wickedness, defying moral goodness, and tells you he is following the Spirit that makes him free, don't believe him. The fruit the Spirit produces is love, joy, peace, and the like. Behavior contrary to that is the work of the flesh." There is nothing exhaustive about the lists in Galatians 5 and even the lists need to be worked with; but the direction and drift of life is made abundantly clear.

Some glad soul just had to sing about it! "You have set my heart free," he said to God (Psalm 119:32). This psalm that takes 176 verses to praise the Torah that God has given to Israel is not a case of bibliolatry. The singer doesn't worship the Torah and bow down before the text

of the Torah—it's God he worships and exalts. But while he knows the difference between his Bible and his God, he doesn't sever the connection so that the Torah is "lifeless" words.

He believes what every thinking person believes: truth is not the absence of God, it is not a substitute for God; it is God making his presence known and felt! If truth sets the heart free (John 8:32) it's because that's how God bestows freedom! The Torah can make alive only because it's inseparably connected with the sovereign Lord. Christ reminds us of the life-giving force of his words in John 6:63 when he says, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." He isn't identifying the spoken truth with the person of the Spirit; he's insisting that the Spirit makes himself present and active in and through the words.

So when the psalmist says (119:50, 93) "This is my comfort in my affliction that thy promises give me life...I will never forget thy precepts; for by them thou has given me life." (RSV for "preserves" his life, as in other versions) he combines the notion that the word of God is the instrument by which God gives him life.

Of course, the psalmist doesn't atomize the Torah into "legal" or "promissory" or "rehearsed truth" sections—he sees it as a single gift of God designed to give and sustain life in Israel. If we had asked him, "Do 'commands' set free or bind?" he would have said they do both, and would probably have been mystified by the need for the question. And had we listened to him sing the psalm which extols the goodness, grace and love of God expressed in the Torah, we wouldn't have had the nerve to ask him if he thought he was setting himself free by obedience. God sets the heart free!

What a heart set free will do:

The psalm takes 176 verses to bubble out delighted praise of God's Torah. The psalmist, spinning like an ecstatic Snoopy in a Peanuts cartoon, cries out in his pleasure (119:97), "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." Does that sound like someone who thinks the Torah is a galling yoke he wishes he were free from?

In verse 32 he sings: I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free." He sees himself running free in some roomy place, pleased to be at liberty, careering down paths that lead to everywhere and shouting, "I run in the paths of your commands, for you have set my heart free."

The psalmist sees himself as no longer hemmed in. In Genesis 26 Isaac is having trouble with Abimelech's herdsmen. He keeps digging or re-digging wells and the Philistine herdsmen continue to claim them as theirs. Finally, Isaac moves far enough away from them that they made no claim to the new well (26:22) and Isaac names the well Rehoboth (a form of the word here). The word has notions of "room," more room, less of that sense of being hemmed in, enlargement.

Some versions have the psalmist praising God because "you have enlarged my heart." Whether we take the heart as "the understanding" or the whole person viewed from a specific angle, they all agree that the psalmist is enjoying a new sense of freedom; old partitions are torn down, narrow thinking, restrictive fears are removed and he can breathe and roam free. And when God has liberated his heart by making it bigger, what does he do? What does this big-hearted, liberated man do? Complain that he doesn't have enough information? Dismiss the Torah? Outgrow scripture? Find the commands of God beneath him? No! The opposite's true! With a bigger and freer heart he makes a bee-line for the way of God's law and runs down that road like a child whose just finished school for the summer (note 119:35).

James Moffatt rightly insisted, "There will always be the law of the Spirit of life. Lawlessness is not a road, it is a bog, even though the bog looks solid and is covered with bright marsh-flowers." (1) He goes on to contrast the mechanical doing of God's commands with a cheerful response. "That is where the change comes, not simply in finding out what we ought

to do but in discovering a new spirit in the following of the Lord. Once...we did not leave the road, but we did not love it."

The psalmist may not worship the Torah, but he fully understands that that's what reveals God to him as nothing else does. Because of the Torah he is able to interpret life and its experiences, because of Torah the world, for all its complexities and mysteries, becomes a world in which God is operating and continuing to reveal himself. Without God's self-revelation in Torah (which includes a rehearsal of his past historical acts and his continuing blessing) there would be no up or down, backwards or forwards; existence would be without drift or direction.

So what will the heart set free do? It will run in the path of God's commands. But how will it run in the path of God's commands if it's duty isn't spelled out with exhaustive precision?

#### The Path Laid Out Before Free Hearts

We've made the point several times that the Torah was no exhaustive blueprint for life, so the path that lies before those whose hearts are made big by God is uncovered as well as acknowledged. But it's more than that because the path before them has to be created as much as anything else. God trusts the believing heart to make a way where there is no clear path.

The Torah opens his eyes and heart, and with his heart enlarged and set free he follows the Torah only to find more freedom and more understanding about the God he adores. It's this kind of benign circle Paul has in mind when he says: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2) Becoming like God enables the believer to know more of what God is like and broadens the horizon for further service.

In Romans 12:2 the verb is a passive imperative, making it clear that the believer doesn't transform himself it's the work of God. Nevertheless the believer isn't a mindless sponge; he wants the transformation (thus the imperative). The psalmist makes the glad confession that it is God who enlarges or sets his heart free and with that freedom he becomes even more of a servant to God. (Compare Romans 6:17-18.)

The call in 12:2 is not based on a sheer leap in the dark. It follows the "therefore" of 12:1 which is based on the rehearsal of non-negotiable truth. Ancient Israel wasn't simply throwing wishful words skywards in the hope that some god or other would be impressed and adopt them. No, some noted modern scholars might think the historicity of Israel's faith is irrelevant, but there's no sign of that thinking in the texts themselves.

Based on information passed down by those who saw and heard and experienced profound events, information that the community took to be truth, worshipers of Yahweh believed he was present with them and shaped their lives according to his revealed character and purposes. All this to say, to dismiss revealed truth completely and depend on "a sweet spirit" to serve God is silly. If we know absolutely nothing about God then of course we wouldn't even know what a "sweet spirit" was nor would we know that God cared one way or another.

Here are a few illustrations of how this works out in obeying some specific commands of the Torah. Here's Leviticus 19:9: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest." It was to be left for the poor and needy (19:10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

If God had wanted to close the door against heartless behavior he didn't speak with enough precision in the commandment. And even if the command had been exhaustively defined an evil heart would not have gone along with it. But as the text sits it isn't difficult to imagine a miserly farmer harvesting as close to the edge as possible, while still claiming he was keeping the commandment. Nor is it difficult to see a person like that debating who, precisely, are "the poor". Lexicons don't settle the matter, slide-rules won't help. He could humiliate and

keep the poor hungry with stony lexical work and lawyer-like slickness. And how are we to answer him? The mean man could drive a truck through the loopholes in the wording. The commandment is clear: cater to the needy and vulnerable. But how does the farmer know what is meant?

The answer is in the phrase that occurs everywhere in connection with laws: "I am the Lord your God." There lies the hope for the poor. And there lies the path for the big-hearted. These words spell out in a clause the whole ground of Israel's existence. "You were rebels and I loved you. You were destitute and I provided; you were helpless and I gave help; you were hungry, thirsty and vulnerable and I supplied; you were exploited and I rescued you. I saw meanness and judged it; I saw injustice and righted it."

In the light of who "the Lord their God" was, Israel was to respond to those who were now in the state they had been in. The basis of their response was the nature and character of the God who was their Lord. "Is my thinking like God's? Is my attitude toward the marginalized people like the Lord's? Am I generous as well as wise?" Life's questions are sometimes settled by explicit statements from God. Humans need some express guidance, they're too prone to wander all over creation; but so much of life's responses are dictated by the shape of the heart, the sharpness of our memories and the awareness that we have been richly blessed despite ourselves.

The path for those with enlarged hearts is not simply a correct response to a code but the living out of a family relationship. Deuteronomy 14:1 tells Israel why they are to behave in certain ways; it's because: "You are children of the Lord your God." That makes Yahweh their Father in whose image they are created and it makes them brothers and sisters in God. Paul takes this direction, too, in Ephesians 5:1 when he says, "Be imitators of God as dearly beloved children and live a life of love..."

There's more in these texts than command; there's the implied fitness of such a lifestyle. As if Paul and Moses had said: "This is who you are! Let who you are God's beloved children shape your response."

A few years ago in Britain a leading Haydn scholar (or was it Elgar?) decided he would complete some of the unfinished scores the composer had left behind. This man knew Joseph Haydn's work inside and out. He wasn't simply familiar with the technical aspects of Haydn, he loved the music; listened and played, conducted and promoted, taught and rejoiced in it. It was a central element in his life.

His love of Haydn's work had grown in knowledge and discernment so he was better equipped to follow the spirit and direction of Haydn more closely than others. Something of this truth is seen in Philippians 1:9-10 where Paul says, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best..." He has in mind more than a choice between good and bad; it's a choice between good, better and best.

It's clear no one can ever know how Haydn himself would have finished these scores. But we can be sure of this: what this brilliant devotee of Haydn produced was a Haydn-like conclusion. We can be sure that Haydn was honored by the end result because it came from the heart of a man who ate, slept and drank the composer's work. If the scores had been finished by a mediocre talent who had no special feeling for Haydn, who spent little or no time immersing himself in that man's music, whose "imitation" of Haydn was nothing but a mechanical reproduction of the obvious patterns then we wouldn't expect a grand and glorious result.

Knowing the mind of God for people isn't determined simply through lexical, syntactical, cultural, sociological, rhetorical, literary or other studies. Requirements would be understood differently depending on the measure of the heart's generosity, one's experience of grace and

favor and the like. Which is why it is important to have loving leadership to model life before the less experienced and mature. The loving leaders become the torah for those of us who are weaker and less experienced or humbled followers of God. The very existence of God-centered, wise, righteous, community-loving leaders to whom the people came to settle disputes tells us that rich experience with God resulted in greater understanding of the Torah and God's mind. These people were thought to have insight that was greater, loyalty to Yahweh that was deeper and more consistent, a love for the community that was broader and richer than those who looked to them for guidance. Having the mind and heart of God opened up the scriptures and showed how they were to be applied.

James Packer in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, page 180 reminds us: "Thirdly, we should note that God's law in both Testaments, full as it looks, is actually quite open-textured. It is not a minutely-detailed code of practice for all our actions every moment...; it is rather, a set of broad guiding principles with sample applications to set us going...they are not so much models for mechanical imitation as cartoons of required attitudes."

All the above has the potential to help us get rid of some needless stress as we live out our lives in God. If two people are genuinely committed to each other it doesn't matter if they don't have all the answers so that behavior will be "just right". A freedom develops between lovers who are friends. They don't have to suffer daily angst about hurting one another's feelings, about being misunderstood or things like that. They don't have to fine tune the relationship to the point where they're endlessly examining it with too great an intensity. Of course they wish to please one another but true friends know the commitment's there and love covers a multitude of social blunders ranging from forgotten birthdays or turning up late or the like.

### **The Spontaneity & Joy of the Heart Set Free**

There's a spontaneity to life when people learn to love one another. There's the capacity for joy that comes not only because each one is able to experience it, but comes as a result of the way they are together. They can live with some structure but they can live without a lot of it. And it's the freeness of the response that adds zest to that kind of living; which is why God wouldn't want us to live a life in which every nanosecond is exhaustively programmed. That life wouldn't be life; and even if it were, it would be a dull affair without creative impulses; it would be a life spent searching endlessly for an explicit verse to cover the immediate situation. We wouldn't have time for anything else but text-hunting.

There's something unhealthy about this ceaseless pursuit of "God's will" in every single situation that faces us. It's certainly right to seek to glorify him in all that we say and do—we have scripture that expressly encourages us to do that—but that isn't the same as believing that God has a specific response in mind that we have to go rummaging through heaven and earth for or waiting paralyzed for some sign from God that one of the several options we set up is the one he wants us to follow. God isn't concerned about laying our lives out second by second and having us to figure out what is on his heavenly chart for us for each day.

We're not talking here about a choice between obvious right and wrong, but a choice between various goods that are open to us. Were God anxious to spell out his will in exhaustive detail he's more than capable of doing it but since he hasn't seen fit to do it, it must be to his glory and our benefit that we live without such a daily chart. To teeter on the brink of a nervous breakdown every time we have to make a decision, wondering if we are going against the will of God (a will he hasn't informed us of) makes no sense at all. In a life like that were we to take it very seriously we would range between a sickening worry that we were defying God's plans or throwing up our hands in despair because we felt we wouldn't know how to please him.

At one and the same time we humans take God too seriously and too casually. Too casually in that we think, or often act as if we think, that he is an amoral loving machine who

will call anyone "righteous" no matter how they rejoice in evil. On the other hand, we take him too seriously when we see him lacking in joy and having only one concern—damning sin and sinners too, if need be. You'd think we hadn't heard the word, "God didn't send his Son into the world to damn the world but to give it life through him!"

The path of those whose hearts have been set free is one that revels in life. You only have to read Psalm 119 (especially in some modern speech version) to sense the vitality and exuberance of the man who dances about in a world that has been shaped and made alive by the existence of the Torah of the gracious God who delights to make himself and his will known to humans.

The Torah comes saying, "You have been loved by God despite the fact that you are unlovely. Isn't that a marvelous thing? Now listen, God is trusting you and you have committed yourself to him in trust. Think of what he means to you and you to him and live in light of that. Don't worry yourself sick over not having all the answers. It isn't all the answers you need, it's a realization of who and whose you are that you need. Grasp the big picture and live within that. Outside the parameters I lay down is only chaos and loss. You'll never find me narrowing your life because I am created by the sovereign Lord for those whose hearts have been enlarged. I present some non-negotiable truths about God because without them there is no life but what I call you to is deeper and richer than you'll ever be able to fathom. The truth I bring to you is not mere information, it's transformation, it's the sovereign God making his holy and gracious presence felt, it's the holy Father exerting his wholesome influence, it's the living Lord imparting life."

It's clear from all this that the Torah wasn't the only thing God gave his worshipers. That is, he didn't lay before these sinners a mass of commandments and say, "There, do the best you can with your own sinful limitations because you'll get no help from me." This would miss the point at the two levels mentioned above. The Torah is not lifeless truth—it is truth that makes alive! And two, Torah did not stand independent of the holy and gracious Lord, it was one of his instruments through which he enriched and quickened them.

The Exodus & Sinai belong together Psalm 119:32 "Let my people go...to serve me." [But see love's refusal in Exodus 21:1-6.] Your freedom is shaped by your holiness. In the very act of freeing Israel God was separating them so that their freedom and holiness are two sides of one coin. The One who frees them separates them, makes them holy. The same is true of the NT church. To wrestle against God's holiness to gain freedom is to wrestle against freedom itself.

"The law of Christ is not an alien thing to which, in slavish dread, a Christian man submits himself; it is the character of his Lord whom he loves and who lives in him..." (2)

(1) His Gifts and Promises, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1934, page 64

(2) W.M. MacGregor, Christian Freedom, Hodder & Stoughton, 1913, page 367. See also page 350, note 1.

## **Torah, Obedience, Life and Death**

The Torah makes no bones about this: life comes with keeping the Torah. New Testament readers aren't used to hearing this because we're mainly nurtured not only on what Paul said but what we've been told Paul meant when in 2 Corinthians 3, for example, he said the Torah was a "dispensation of death". If we allow the Torah to state its own case maybe we'll be able to read Paul better; maybe we'll find that the tensions between Paul and the Torah aren't where we've been led to believe they are.

At this point let's listen to a handful of texts from the Torah itself; texts which express the whole tone of the Torah on this matter. The verses which follow say that life comes with keeping the Torah. Here are a few from Deuteronomy:



And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live... 4:1

You shall be careful to do therefore as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you; that you may live... 5:32-3

All the commandment which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live... 8:1

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? 10:12-13

And there's this from Leviticus 18:5

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live; I am the Lord.

Here's Deuteronomy 30:6, 8, 15-20 which offers the gracious gift of life to a penitent Israel:

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart...so that you will love the Lord you God with all your heart and...soul, that you may live...And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments which I command you this day...See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...by loving the Lord your God...then you shall live...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you..."

Let me repeat: the commandments of God to Israel are an expression of his continuing grace. The Leviticus 18:5 call for obedience is placed squarely in the setting of gracious redemption when it's connected with, "I am the Lord (Yahweh)." Grace and commandments aren't enemies.

In the plainest possible fashion these texts tell us that life with God comes with the faithful keeping of the Torah. Resist the temptation to say, "Yes, but Paul said the Torah was a death-bringer so these passages mustn't say what they appear to say." It might be that these clear passages do say what they appear to say and that Paul's words need to be looked at again. Maybe we've misunderstood Paul rather than these texts.

### **The Torah and "The Curse of the Law"**

But doesn't the Torah threaten curse on those who are under it? Yes! Deuteronomy 27:26 bluntly says, "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." Paul's use of this text in Galatians 3:10 comes close to the Septuagint and sharpens the point for us: "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them." Verse 26 concludes a whole series of curses and the LXX's "all" things simply takes them as a whole.

So how can the Torah bring life if the Torah brings curse? Maybe the obvious answer is that the Torah threatens curse on the impenitent disobedient and offers life to the obedient. Is that not what it says? Moses goes on to speak of blessings for the obedient (chapter 28) but if the Torah could not be kept because it demanded sinlessness why would blessings be offered to the obedient?

Try this: Deuteronomy 27:26 is dealing with apostasy, with people who would not remain in the covenant with God. Nation or individual—refusing to keep the covenant would result in curse!

When Paul uses the text in Galatians, maybe he's saying more about those who were under Torah and grossly violated it than he is about the Torah itself. And we need to remember that in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, Paul shows a "cursing side" of the gospel he preached:

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ.. through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

It's plain to see that the impenitent violation of the Torah (by the nation or the individual) brought down the curse, but it's also clear that life with God came with an obedience of faith rendered within the Torah which is the gracious God's will for them.

### **Could the Torah Really Be Kept?**

But could the Torah really be kept? With our Lutheran Reformed evangelicalism we're used to saying (and hearing) that the Mosaic Covenant Law required sinlessness and that's impossible; but that's what we usually say. How do the above texts read? Do they sound like the Torah could and should be kept? Here's what Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:10-11,14-16:

If you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach...No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Bearing that in mind, listen to 11:1, 13-14, 22: "Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always...So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season...If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him then the Lord will..."

Doesn't that sound like the Torah could and should be kept? When sinful Israel at Sinai said they would do whatever God asked of them, God said they had answered well but commented that they wouldn't (not couldn't) keep their word Deuteronomy 5:28-29. They didn't think God was laying on them an impossible task or they wouldn't have agreed to do it. And obviously God didn't think he was giving them an impossible task. No one heard God mutter, "Deluded fools, don't they realize this Torah can't be kept by humans?"

The psalmist(s) in 119 thought the covenantal law should and could be kept. In fact he keeps claiming he has kept it.

Blessed are those...who walk according to the law of the Lord...who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways...I keep your statutes...I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end...I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart...I will always obey your law, for ever and ever...this has been my practice: I obey your precepts...I keep your precepts with all my heart...I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me...I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws...I have not strayed from your precepts...My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end...I obey your laws for I love them greatly. (NIV)

["Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always...So if you obey the commands I am giving you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and soul then I will send rain..." Deuteronomy, as above.]

The psalmist says all this even though he confesses that he has been chastised at times for sinning. It didn't seem to have entered his mind that obeying the law required sinlessness.

But how's it possible to keep the Torah and break commandments? Well, whatever the answer to that is, this psalm insists that it's possible. We might ask how it's possible to "walk in the light" and still commit sins that need to be forgiven (1 John 1:7-9). Walking in the light and keeping the Law must both be possible even for one who commits sin. This would confirm the point that the Torah doesn't require sinlessness from the worshiper on the pain of loss of life with God. Bless me, God gave the covenant Law to people who were already sinners so how could he offer life and blessing on the basis of their sinlessness?

The essence of the covenant demand (from the nation's standpoint) was Israel's commitment to Yahweh; that they would serve him and him alone; that they would have no other god before him and that they would seek Yahweh's honor and glory. Sin which was committed in violation of that essential commitment was sin that broke the covenant. It was of the magnitude that it ruptured the relationship because it was fundamentally treasonous. The worship of the golden calf illustrates this well. When he sees the nature of the sin and its widespread character, Moses smashed the two tables of the Law because that sin was precisely the kind that violated the relationship itself.

That God was merciful and didn't completely wash his hands of them was a response of sheer grace in the face of an outright and widespread apostasy. The violation of the covenant law was not simply lawlessness, it was treachery against a Person; it was profound contempt for a relationship God had initiated out of his holy love. To this Lord Israel pledged her love and prostituted themselves even before Moses comes down the mountain with the covenant tables.

It was situations like these that the prophets and Paul had in mind when they spoke of Israel breaking God's covenant and bringing the curse down on themselves. This kind of covenant violation was both widespread and foundational. Sins committed "unwittingly" rather than sins of "presumption" were expected (compare Matthew 18:7 and 1 Corinthians 11:17 which acknowledge the existential realities of life in a sinful world) and were covered for the penitent sinner by the sacrificial arrangement. Sins that were flagrant and carried out in a spirit that despised the relationship with God; for them there was no sacrifice. Some laws could be broken and the sinner would still retain his citizen's status; others cost the sinner his life and/or his citizenship.

When the nation at large engaged in such sinning, that was apostasy. Sometimes God severely chastised large segments of the nation because of this, rather than cut the whole nation off. But the day would come when the full judgment would fall on the nation for its national apostasy. In that day, the nation as a nation would come under the curse of the Torah. Exile was illustrative of such a day; but when the nation as a nation rejected the Messiah as the fulfillment of all that the Torah was carrying them toward, the Mosaic covenantal Torah was ended and the way was opened for Israel to enter into a renewed relationship with God via a "new covenant". (This matter will be taken up again in a later piece, God enabling.)

But the nation didn't need to apostatize, that's the point. They could by God's grace have given him loyal love and as a nation they rarely did. But not every individual turned from God in apostasy, there were always those who lived unto him; but because they were all bound up together in that covenant they stood and fell together with the a nation.

And maybe it's that face of things that we have most difficulty with in reading scripture. Christians tend to take everything in too individualistic a manner; we seem to have little sense of corporateness. The scriptures never obliterate the individual but they always see the individual within the community (humanity, Old Testament or the New Testament church).

Luke 10: 25-37: "A expert in the Torah came to Christ asking him, 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

The Master's response was, "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?" ("Read" here obviously means, "How do you understand it?")

The teacher responds by joining Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and the Lord says to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and live."

This text has a lot to tell us. The man wanted to know what he "must do" to inherit eternal life but it apparently never entered his head that in doing what was required he would "earn" eternal life. He used the word "inherit" which while it can include the notion of "getting" or "having," it doesn't include the idea of earning.

It seems like everyone thought there was something to "do" in order to be saved or gain eternal life. This is especially clear in Luke's writings. In 3:10-14 the people come asking John what they should "do"? In Acts 2:37 people wanted to know what they must "do". Saul wanted to know what he must "do" and the risen Christ told him he would be told what to "do". The angel told Cornelius that he would be told what he must "do" and the man repeats that to Peter. The Philippian jailer wants to know what he must "do" and the rich young ruler comes to Christ, wanting to know what he must "do".

There is nothing in any of this to suggest they had a legalistic "doing" in mind; nothing to suggest that they thought they were earning or meriting life with God. Life with God is in relationship with him and a certain quality of human response is required by God if humans want that relationship. Say that the human response is initiated and nurtured by the grace of God in all its various workings that's indisputably true, but say that it's the human who responds to God's work and not God himself who does the responding through a human.

When the teacher of Torah asked what he had to "do", it apparently never entered the Master's head to give him instruction about legalism. There was nothing like, "Now, that's your first mistake. You can't 'do' anything to inherit eternal life. That's part of the trouble with you Torah people, you're always going on about 'doing'. You have a legalistic heart and your question proves it." [That's what Lutheran Reformed evangelicals would have said--and some I've read have said that.]

Not at all! The Christ asks him what the Torah taught he must do and the man gave the correct answer. The Master didn't contradict him; he confirmed the man's answer and insisted, "Do this and you will live." It's important that people receive assurance about their salvation with God but the way to give them assurance is not to deny their need to respond to God. They must be taught that they do not save themselves but the way to do that is not to teach them they don't have to obey God. They most certainly do have to obey him!

Christ doesn't deny that the man can inherit life with God through obedience to the Torah--he insists that loving obedience that accords with the Torah is the way to life (10:28, note also 10:37b).

Can you imagine what the Lord's response would have been if the man had come saying, "Eternal life is a gift of God and I need not do anything to inherit it--true or false?"

Can you imagine what the Lord's response would have been if the man had come saying, "I know I have to 'do enough' to inherit eternal life and I'm wondering what that involves."

I don't think it's helpful or fair to the text to say that Christ knew it was impossible to do what the Torah called for. Nothing like that appears in this section and if Christ ever had a ready-made opportunity to bury this notion of "self-salvation" it was on this occasion. But he doesn't divorce the keeping of the Torah from gaining life eternal he binds this Jewish teacher to it. Those of us who are anxious for God to get the glory as the sole Savior are sometimes too anxious, and it shows when we persist in drawing lawyer-like distinctions that the Master refused to draw.

When the rich young man came asking what he had to do to get eternal life, the Christ said (Matthew 19:17), "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments." Nothing that follows in the discussion contradicts what Jesus said to him there. If our reading of the text sees the young man convicted of a deep-seated selfishness which is in violation to "love your neighbor as yourself," it changes nothing of what Christ said about obeying the commandments if you want to enter life. If this young man is excluded from eternal life it's because he will not follow the Torah which, as people like Chris Wright and Gordon McConville have fully demonstrated, called for and nurtured astonishing generosity toward the poor and the aliens.

I'm sure we're not letting the text speak for itself when we construe it so that Jesus is thinking something like, "This young man thinks he earns life by meritorious works. The truth is, it's impossible to enter life by keeping the commandments, but I'm going to speak as if it's possible." At which point he says, "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments." This is the kind of thing current evangelicalism says (see it in The Shack and in Douglas Moo on Romans 2:5-16) but you don't find it rising out of the biblical witness.

Talk about "doing enough" to have life or "earning" life is what we bring to the text; it doesn't appear in it. Jesus Christ believed that in the absence of obedience to God there could be no life. Nobody knew better than he that humans had life with God because of the sheer grace and generosity of the Holy Father, despite human sinfulness. Nevertheless, he still insists that this young man keep the Torah. "...if you want to enter life, obey the commandments." (Compare Matthew 23:2.)

But that business about "keeping the Torah" if you want life is what unsettles us. It keeps jarring us with the ring of "legalism". Christ was no legalist! If he connected obedience to the Torah with life with God, his disciples should be prepared to do so. The unease, I suspect, arises because we've misread Paul for a very long time. More about that later.]

### **Love & The Fulfilling of the Torah**

Because we've been taught to read Paul in a certain way, we've all thought at one time or another (I certainly have!) that the Torah was one revealed version of the "legal system" of moral law under which all humans lived. Non-Israel, however they were supposed to have gotten their moral law, didn't get what Israel got--a specially revealed code of behavior. That's what we say they got. God says he gave them a gracious covenant! Look at Hebrews 4:1-2 and John 1:17.

Then, abstracting the commandments of the Torah from their grace and covenant soil we turned them into raw legal demands of the moral kind; free standing commands without a larger context. Since "commands" have only one mode ("do this" or "don't do this"), in themselves they can make no allowances for failure and implicitly require a flawless response. If the covenantal Torah was that kind of naked moral code only the flawless could have life with God; but the truth is, the Torah isn't anything like that. It brands all moral failure or transgression as "sin" that's in need of forgiveness but it also embodies in it's structure as a gracious covenant the way to and assurance of forgiveness.

Old Testament scholar, B.W. Anderson says, "To 'choose life,' Moses is represented as saying, is to 'love Yahweh,' to 'obey' Yahweh's commandments, to 'hold fast' to Yahweh (Deut. 30:20). Life is not mere extension of days or enjoyment of the good land (though those benefits are included); at the deepest level to live is to love God, to be centered in God."

In saying this he does no more than follow the Torah's own teaching.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments...then you shall live... Deuteronomy 30:16 RSV

Jesus insisted that the whole Torah and the Prophets hung on two commandments, to love God and the neighbor (Matthew 22:40) and when an expert in the text of the Torah conceded that loving God and his neighbor was the way to eternal life, Jesus said he was correct in that view (Luke 10:25-28). It wasn't only the Christ who knew what God was really after. See also Mark 12:32-33 where an enquirer says that to love God and his neighbor is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Christ acknowledges that as wisdom on the man's part and commends him for it.

But can sinful humans love the Lord with all their hearts and souls? Can sinful humans love their neighbors as they love themselves? Well, let me ask you this: is that what God called for? Is that what Christ told his lawyer acquaintance to do? We can do one or two things with these commandments: we can turn them into human impossibilities and excuse ourselves or we can accept them as they stand, using some sanctified common sense.

It's to sinners with sinful hearts that God gives this command so he can't be asking for a flawless response. He knows right well we can't serve him out of sinless hearts so he calls us to serve him with the ones we have. It isn't the archangel Michael or Gabriel he's addressing. Whatever our limitations, he calls us for a complete commitment within the parameters of those limitations. Yes, sinners can love the Lord their God with all their hearts and have been called to do so. It's nonsense to say that God leaves us "on our own" to love him. Not only is that false it cannot be true for God cannot leave us alone because he loves us and that's why when we love him we're loving him because he loves us first.

### **Can "Love" Be Commanded?**

It's often been said: "Love can't be commanded!" because we have no control over love. That depends on what we mean by "love" and it depends on what we think is happening when God "commands" us to love him. In any case, as a bald declaration the statement's probably incorrect. We can certainly make a glad-hearted commitment to God and others and this is an aspect of love. We can purpose and act on that purpose to cultivate a way of seeing things, a way of appreciating things, a way of feeling about things. Feel the attraction of literature and music and feed it with the right kind of material and love of music, intense pleasure from music, is almost a foregone conclusion. Feed the heart and mind with the right kind of materials and an intense delight and pleasure at the sensed presence of God is an almost certain result. This is not a claim that we "by ourselves" become like this--we're never "on our own".

Love of God, says Anderson, among other things, is a covenant loyalty that rises out of God's prior love (see Deuteronomy 7:9). This makes sense and that truth delivers us, thank God, from having to generate the "warm fuzzes" at our every thought of God. Still, wouldn't it be a terrible state of affairs if we could develop an eagerness to read marvelous literature or listen to music or seek the presence of a person and never experience such emotion or desire relative to God? Never to know what it means to be filled with joy and gladness as we sense his presence in our lives? Never to be able to say with Charles Wesley, "Jesus the very thought of thee with sweetness fills my breast"?

When God commands his people to love him he isn't asking humans to produce an emotional state in an instant; as if they were emotional faucets that can be turned on or off at will. The command is fulfilled by an initial commitment and a purposed growing intimacy. And as the relationship deepens between God and his people, emotions are more fully enlisted in his service. It would be a mistake to emphasize the emotions in our service to God and to the detriment of the will and the understanding; but the psalmists who were aware of the all-rounded nature of humans had lives filled with joy, they spoke tender words to and about God

and thought nothing of it. Rich emotions in the service of God will do for our life with God what they do for our life with one another.

In his book *Man to Man*, R.E. Welsh offers this: "When the man's love-light is lit by the one woman, love reveals to him a new world, and adds another province to his life. What he smiled at as infatuation in other people has become the elixir of his own existence, thrilling him with all the wonder of a new discovery. He had observed it as a pretty element in love-poetry and stories, but now it is dancing in his blood, touching the world with color and charm, tuning his life to a new motive. The maiden on her part had been callow and variable, with centre everywhere; but at 'The Coming of Love' a flush of warm womanhood mounts into her face; her nature develops, rounds and ripens and blossoms; love gives her a centre and a soul. For each of them this mystical experience is a sort of second birth. It would seem foolish and impossible for them to explain it to you; you must feel it to know it; and it laughs happily at cold common-sense, for it is a new sense."

He goes on to say that one's experience of Christ must become, not merely something we hold and observe with sensible respect, but something that holds us and adds a dynamic to our lives. He's surely correct. Of course we won't come to see God in some romantic light, but we can see God and hold him not only in respectful awe but also in grateful and warm affection as the centre of our lives; of course we can. Even in human loves we can see that love means more than "the warm fuzzes".

Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, page 144  
Welsh, page 144

## **Torah, Paul and Legalism**

Following Luther we've (certainly I have) been accustomed to read Paul as if he were dealing with proto-Pelagians. But there's another way to read Paul.

Paul's doctrine of justification by grace through faith is as old as our sin. Paul substantiates it from texts like Genesis 15, Isaiah 28 and Habakkuk 2. What I've just said is true but it is misleading if it gives the impression Paul uses these texts to deal with a Lutheran type legalism. Paul would certainly oppose any form of legalism or self-salvation but in Romans and Galatians what he is in fact opposing is Jewish exclusivism. Some Messianic Jews were saying that righteousness in the Messiah was only for Jews (or proselytes) so that righteousness wasn't possible apart from the Jewish Torah.

Luther heard Paul correctly when he said, "Righteousness via keeping the torah is contrary to the gospel of Christ." His mistake was in misconstruing what that meant.

He took it to mean that Paul was saying:

1) One couldn't gain righteousness by the torah, and, 2) that the very attempt was misconceived.

This view of Paul generates tension between Paul and a mass of texts (along with the entire drift of those texts) that call Israel to keep the torah and enjoy life with God as a consequence. This is what passages like Leviticus 18:5, Deuteronomy 30:15-16 called for and what they promised--life with God.

So what do we do with Paul's use of the OT because it seems clearly at variance with the OT texts and its one story?

1) We insist on reading Paul and ignoring the OT. If Paul said the OT set out a legalistic way of salvation then it did; no matter what the OT appeared to say! One of the consequences of this is to make Jews shake their head at our ignorance and our chosen blindness to the OT's own telling of the story. "These Christians, sacrifice the Torah on the basis of the word of a renegade Jew called Paul."

2) Or we say Paul was slating a legalistic understanding of the OT and torah. If we're fair to a reading of the OT and its grand drift we can't have Paul actually having a quarrel with its teaching so we take the "legalism" quarrel. We say he is taking issue with a legalistic understanding of the OT. This makes sense only in the beginning.

Paul really did have some criticisms of the torah! When he says, "The torah is not of faith" he isn't saying "A legalistic perversion of the torah is not of faith." When he says, "No one is justified by the torah" he isn't saying, "No one is justified by a legalistic perversion of the torah." When he says "Now God's righteousness is revealed apart from the torah" he isn't saying, "Now God's righteousness is revealed apart from a legalistic view of the torah."

Paul was saying something about the torah itself that got him in trouble even with messianic Jews. Even those who believed that salvation was by grace still had trouble with Paul's view of how the torah functioned in the light of Jesus Christ (Acts 15:11; Galatians 2:11-21).

Some messianic Jews (including Peter in his weaker moments) who never believed they had to earn God's promises wanted to bind the torah on all who would seek blessings in the Messiah. If they wanted Jewish blessings they would have to become Jews, torah-keepers, circumcised and Sabbath-keepers.

After all, the Messiah was theirs, the promises were theirs, the fathers were theirs and the covenants were theirs. "You want to get our blessings? You become one of us." As far as they were concerned righteousness before God in and through the Messiah was a Jewish thing, it was "their" righteousness.

You had to become a torah-keeper not in the sense that you had to live sinlessly--no one believed that. Judaism wasn't seen as earning God's grace and favor but it was held by many Messianic Jews as the exclusive way to righteousness and life "in the Messiah". Messianic life and righteousness before God was seen as a Jewish prerogative. It was national righteousness, "their own righteousness" Romans 10:3). Gentiles had no part in it. And if Gentiles were to be received into fellowship with the Messiah it had to be on Jewish terms. The torah had to be kept.

Jewish exclusiveness was the problem and not individual "self-salvation". Messianic Jews were not telling Gentiles they had to be sinless or that they had to "do enough" to merit God's favor but they were insisting that the Gentile converts be circumcised as well as baptized. They were saying that Gentiles had to be circumcised (become Jewish proselytes) and Paul reminded them that this would make them a debtor to keep the whole torah.

The torah had to be kept by Israel prior to Christ. God himself said it did. When God called for them to "keep it" he wasn't calling for sinlessness nor was he promoting life by virtue of moral attainment. He had in mind a covenant he made with Israel and he was calling Israel to be true to it. He said that if they were true to it they would enjoy life in relationship with him. This is the plain import of Leviticus 18:5 and a hundred other texts like it.

Torah had to "be kept" but not as an earning system. Jews knew they were sinners. God who gave them the torah knew they were sinners when he gave it to them. But God did say that if they wanted life with him they would have to "keep" the torah (texts by the score). This wasn't a call to sinlessness that was obviously beyond them. The whole covenant was grace and the sacrificial system and Yom Kippur heralded the ceaseless need for the forgiveness that was graciously granted to them. The call to "keep the law" was a call to a glad-hearted response of faith. Moses said the torah didn't call for something they couldn't give (Deuteronomy 30:10-16). It called for a loyal trust in God (rather than, say, going to other gods). This they could give but didn't.

The furor in the early church as seen in Galatians and Romans is not about earning or not earning. It was about making Gentiles come via the law to gain righteousness and life with



God in Jesus Christ. Messianic Jews wanted to bind circumcision, Sabbath, food and purification laws--in short, the whole torah on Gentiles.

The torah (as a covenant) was an interim and exclusive arrangement with the only people God "knew" (Amos 3:2). This torah established Israel as God's elect (note Deuteronomy 4:4-8 and 6:24-25). It established and proclaimed Israel as God's holy nation, his kingdom of priests. Nehemiah 9:13-14 rehearses God's grace to them and part of it is the giving of the law to Israel.

And it was God's grace and faithfulness toward them that blinded them to his grace and faithfulness to the entire human race. They longed for the Messiah who would bring in everlasting righteousness and life but they sought it in terms of their torah because they were self-centered and wanted to establish their own (Jewish, national) righteousness. All they could hear was Leviticus 18:5 (and other such passages) that was addressed to them and they had no sense of God's care for other nations (as in the Abrahamic covenant which preceded the torah). Nor did they recognize that they were to be "a servant" for all nations.

In being bent on establishing their own righteousness (see it in Messianic Jews in Acts 15 and Galatians 2, including vacillating Peter) they were blind to the righteousness of God (God's faithfulness) which is toward the whole world (manifested in Christ). So taken up with themselves and oblivious to what God was doing for the world in Christ they found God, Christ and the church's gospel an offence.

A righteousness via the Jewish torah was possible. Not an earned righteousness, mark you, but a righteousness nevertheless. The righteousness via the torah was open only to Jews. This righteousness was the result of God's love for and faithfulness to the patriarchs. This covenant relationship and the consequent righteousness and life with God belonged to Abraham's offspring through Jacob. That was the will and choice of God and not just a Jewish claim (compare Romans 9:4-5 and Ephesians 2: 11-12).

The righteousness and life via the torah called for covenant loyalty to Yahweh. There was no call for a degree of moral excellence as if that somehow put God in their debt. That was never in the picture. The commitment to Yahweh was to be Israel's response of faith. But it was more than that it bore witness to the existence of the relationship to which God had graciously called them. He called them and not any other nation. Them! The fleshly offspring of Abraham. And the flesh with its covenantal markers like the torah, circumcision, Sabbath-keeping and the like became a snare to them.

In the fulfilling of God's faithfulness (righteousness) "the flesh" profits nothing. The Messiah himself said that. Though in one flow of thought he insisted that people eat his flesh and drink his blood if they want life in another he insisted that the flesh profits nothing it is the (S)pirit that gives life (John 6:53-63). The grand story of God's righteousness (faithfulness) embraces humanity in its entirety and a "fleshly" Messiah can't accomplish it all (compare 2 Corinthians 5:16 for one aspect of this).

## **Torah: Could it give life or not?**

Here's Leviticus 18:5: "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord."

Here's Galatians 3:21: "For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law."

Which is true? Leviticus clearly says that life with God could be gained by obedience to the law [by covenant fidelity, by a faithful response to grace and not earned]. Just as clearly Paul implies that no such law had been given as could procure righteousness.

The correct answer is that both are true. Leviticus is speaking of an offer of life within the Mosaic covenant structure that was offered only to Jews and Paul is speaking of eschatological covenant life/righteousness [see Romans 10:5] that is offered to humanity in and through Jesus Christ.

He says that a law had not been given (he uses *edothē*, an aorist in the indicative and passive) that would bring "life". That is, God hadn't given a law that was able to impart life.

But, once more, that is exactly what God said he did do. How are we to "reconcile" Galatians 3.21 and Leviticus 18.5? As someone said a long time ago, you don't "reconcile" friends--they aren't enemies. These two friends are speaking of two different agendas and two different eras.

Leviticus 18.5 and texts like it speak of a gracious God bringing life to Israel within the terms of the Mosaic covenant. That covenant brought righteousness (life with God) to those to whom it was given and who responded to his grace in covenant fidelity. Read the texts for yourself. The life God offered Israel was life; he meant life could/would come to them as his people in contrast to those who worshiped the gods of Egypt and Canaan (Leviticus 18.1-4). This was life offered to sinners who lived in covenant fidelity with Yahweh.

The "life" ["righteousness" in Romans 10:5] spoken of in Leviticus 18:5 was a dynamic gift, it was life experienced within an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time gift like an Oscar. Life for Israel existed by virtue of their having GOD as their God. "Life" for Israel wasn't experienced in isolation from God and much less in flagrant rejection of God. To walk away from God was to walk away from "life". Deuteronomy 30:15-20 expressly says so.

A nation that simply would not have God as their God didn't walk away still clutching their "Oscar". God's eternal purpose was to bring life to all nations and to bring it through Jesus in the Messianic age. This was life for the world, eschatological life in Jesus Christ. That was something to which the Jewish law pointed and led; something it laid the groundwork for by bringing in the Messiah but the Mosaic law itself could not accomplish that massive purpose--it was only for Jews. God never gave a law to accomplish a universal purpose (Galatians 3.21). That purpose could only be accomplished in Christ.

We need to bear in mind that in Galatians Paul was writing to/about people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

Their problem didn't lie in saying that life with God was possible without Christ; they didn't believe that!

But they wanted to restrict the life found in the Messiah to Jews and Jewish proselytes or at least Torah observant Gentiles; they wanted to restrict it to those keeping the Jewish law. Jesus was a Jewish Messiah, you understand, so one had to live as or become a Jew in order to gain the life and righteousness that could be found only in him based on keeping the Jewish law. Leviticus 18:5. Paul insisted, of course, that righteousness and life could be found only in Christ but he insisted that this life and righteousness was for all nations rather than just Israel and he wouldn't tolerate this Jewish sectarianism—see Galatians 2.11-16.

But it was life in Christ that was the center of the debate. The issue in Galatians was not: "Could Israel have life with God before Christ's coming?" The issue was not: "On what terms could Israel have life with God before Christ's coming?"

The issue was: Now that Christ has come, who gains righteousness and life with God? Now that Christ has come does anyone gain righteousness and life with God by adhering to the Jewish law?

It was Paul's view that the glorious Jewish law (as a covenant) belonged to another age and had a limited range. He knew the commandment (torah) was intended to bring life (Romans 7:10) and he knew Moses offered them life with God in terms of keeping the law in trusting allegiance to God (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). None of that he would deny.

But none of that was at issue in the Galatian situation.

There was nothing evil about the Law so it wasn't opposed to God's promises in Abraham (3:21 and Romans 7:7,12). But it wasn't adequate for the task of universal blessing in Abraham through Christ.

Paul Jewish opponents knew that Jesus was the Messiah and knew that in Jesus all persons of all nations were welcome and that Messianic blessings were grounded in grace [Acts 15:10-11]. But they held that the nations were welcome in the Jewish Messiah on Jewish terms [see Acts 15:1] and Peter who knew better folded under their pressure [Galatians 2:14a].

In effect this confined salvation in the Lord Jesus to Jews, Jewish proselytes or Torah observant Gentiles.

In effect it shut out those who had the faith of Abraham but did not keep the Mosaic Law. Salvation in the Lord Jesus was made a national thing--a Jewish experience [see Galatians 5:1-4].

Paul said, "For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law." (Galatians 3:21) The life and righteousness of which he speaks is the life and righteousness that is to be found for all nations only in Christ, the seed of Abraham. It is that life and righteousness Paul has in mind. It is life in the Messianic age that Paul is talking about and not life prior to the coming of the Messiah. Note Hebrews 11:39-40.

So if we ask the general question, "Could the Law of Moses bring righteousness and life with God?" the answer has to be yes! To those who gave glad-hearted allegiance to God in Mosaic covenant terms prior to the coming of the Messiah.. That's Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:15-16. "You shall I keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live; I am the Lord." And, "See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances then you shall live..."

(This was always a matter of God's grace. The Mosaic law did not require Jews to be sinless, for pity's sake. They were already sinners when God gave it to them and they would continue to be. What God insisted on is that Israel remain with him in covenant fidelity and not go off to serve other gods (Deuteronomy 30:11-20).

If we ask the more specific question, "Could the Mosaic Law bring in eschatological righteousness and life?" the answer is a decisive no! The Mosaic torah (covenant law) was an interim arrangement and had a limited range. It was not intended to be and therefore could not result in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. If a Law had been given by which eschatological righteousness and life could have been brought in, Paul would have been content with that being the case (3:21). As it was, the Law that was brought in, while it served many purposes, wasn't intended to perform that function. Indeed, if it had been and God had ordained that universal righteousness had to come by the Jewish torah then Christ's death would have been for nothing (2:21).

In addition to all that, Israel refused to respond in covenant fidelity. They wouldn't give what they could give and were under obligation to give. The Law then became their accuser and judge and bound the nation to the curse that was attached to covenant infidelity [Deuteronomy 27:26]. This meant Israel needed to be redeemed from the violated covenant which now (due to Sin's sinister working) had become their enemy—Romans 7:11-14.

Again, we need to note that Paul is speaking to believers in the Christ. His opponents insisted that in the eschatological era life in and through Christ came by the Jewish Torah and therefore all who wanted life in Christ would have to submit to the Torah. Paul insisted that if universal righteousness could have come by the Torah then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21).

Had he been addressing non-believing Jews his argument would have been framed altogether differently. But since he makes Christ's death the test of gospel truth it's clear that he's addressing believers in Jesus—besides, he opposes Peter and even his colleague in Gentile evangelistic work. Believers, Paul thought, had to make up their minds: acknowledge the impotency of the Torah to gain life in the eschatological age, the world to come or conclude that Christ died for nothing. They had to acknowledge that the Jewish covenant offered righteousness and life only to Israel and that that road to righteousness was terminated as well as fulfilled in Jesus [Romans 10:4] therefore couldn't fulfill and were not meant to fulfill the universal purposes of God in Abraham and his offspring Jesus Christ.

While it's true that God knew Israel as a nation would not keep the covenant (Deuteronomy 5:27-29 and elsewhere) it is nevertheless true that prior to the coming of Jesus Christ a trusting commitment to God in terms of the Torah brought life and righteousness. Leviticus 18:5, Deuteronomy 6:25 and elsewhere says so.

So could the Jewish law (Torah) bring life? Yes, to the obedient Jew to whom it was given and for as long as God caused that covenant to stand.

Could the life and righteousness of the "world to come" that embraced all nations in Abraham's promises come by the Jewish law? Absolutely not.

Once more, the covenant Law the Jews wanted to bind on Gentiles was the very covenant Law the nation (as a whole) despised and dishonored throughout its history. The crucifixion of Jesus was the final proof of that. To bring Gentiles under the OT Covenant was to bring them under a curse—the one the Jewish nation itself was under.

You might think the related pieces in this section on this topic are of some use.

## **Torah: Grace and Truth came by Moses**

**"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." John 1:17**

John 1:17 is often used to show that Moses didn't bring truth or grace and that what he did bring was a religion that was essentially a legal system. We know that's not correct.

John summarizes the purpose of his gospel in 20:30-31. He wants his readers to "keep the faith," (NEB) or, less likely, to come to faith in Jesus Christ so that they might have eternal life. In pursuing that end he has a number of sub themes and one of them is that Christ outshines all who went before him whether it's Jacob who gives water, the Baptist who bore witness to him, Abraham who rejoiced to see Christ's day or Moses who gave manna in the wilderness.

That theme begins early in the book where the Baptist's light bears witness to the true light and where the glory of God (the Shekinah) that dwelled among the people is exceeded by the incarnation of God in all his glory (Compare 1:14 with Exodus 40:34). That glory, we're told, is seen in his very Son who is full of grace and truth. 1

The contrast then moves to Moses who had been intimately associated with God and even reflected the glory of God (Exodus 33:13-22; 34:29-35). But Moses had never seen God himself. The only Son whose eternal intimacy with the Father made the Father known in a way that wasn't possible for Moses or anyone else.

It was out of the fullness of grace and truth that Messianic believers were blessed. Moses brought glory and grace (compare Paul's 2 Corinthians 3:7-11) 2 but the Son brought fullness of glory and gave "grace upon grace".3 Moses brought grace and truth when he came in God's name, proclaiming God's loving faithfulness to the patriarchs, and anyone who doesn't know that has been blinded to the truth of the scriptures by an over-eager defense of the peculiarly Christian faith. Blinded, too, by a misunderstanding of the nature of Old Testament Torah.

John has no intention of denying Old Testament grace or truth; he fully intends to insist that that truth and glory and grace has reached its summit and completion in God's own Son. In Christ we have received glory upon glory, truth upon truth and grace on top of (or in place of) grace.

According to Hebrews 4:2 what Moses brought from God to Israel was gospel. "For good news came to us just as it did to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers."

Not only does the Hebrew writer insist that what Moses brought was "gospel," he insisted that an appropriate response to that gospel was faith. He had earlier made the point that those to whom that gospel came, died without blessing because they were disobedient, and he calls that disobedience "unbelief". (3:16-18; compare also 4:2 and 4:6.)

It's clear from this that the profound difference between the Old and New Testament messages is not that one was legalistic and the other gospel or that one required (a legalistic response of) "deeds" rather than "faith". Both messages were gospel and both messages required the obedience of trust. This shouldn't surprise us and we shouldn't give the impression that the contrast throughout Hebrews is between a "system of works" and a "gospel of grace". It is no such thing. Hebrews 11 insists that the New Covenant called for nothing more nor less than what had counted before God from the very beginning the obedience of faith! 4

And no wonder the Hebrew writer calls Moses' message "gospel", listen to Moses' commission in Exodus 6:2-8, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they dwelt as sojourners. Moreover I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold in bondage and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burden of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.' "All these rich promises and what they imply about the God who makes them is nothing short of "good news". And part of that gospel was that God would take them as his people and he would be their God in a covenanted relationship (compare Exodus 19:5-6 and 24:3-8).

To contrast the obedience the Torah calls for with the gracious redeeming work of God in Christ is to contrast the wrong things and create needless tension. To make a proper contrast we need to compare God's gracious redeeming work in rescuing Israel from Egypt with his redeeming work in rescuing a human race. One outshines the other but it doesn't deny the glory or grace of the other. It wouldn't be difficult to create a pseudo tension if we compared the blunt demand for obedience found in a host of New Covenant texts with God's gracious redemption of Israel from Egypt. If we did that, it would make the New Covenant writings look legalistic. God's free and sovereign grace undergirds the call for obedience in both covenants and that gives obedience a responsive character rather than a creative one.

Moses brought grace and truth. He takes almost eleven chapters of Deuteronomy to lay a foundation of salvation and life with God by free grace, before he repeats and expounds the commandments of the Torah.

He rehearses how good God has been to them; multiplying them, delivering them, guiding them, tolerating their unbelief and presumption, sustaining them for forty years in the awful wilderness, overcoming their enemies and giving them even more land than he had promised. He reminds them that God honored them by giving them a covenantal Torah that the

world would be jealous of and that he offered them such intimacy with himself in that covenant that was totally unheard of.

All of this, not because Israel was impressive or strong (Deuteronomy 7:7; 8:17) and it certainly wasn't because they were a righteous people. Note how repetitive this text is as it drives its truth home. "Do not say in your heart...'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess the land'; ...Not because of our righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land...but that he may confirm the word which the Lord swore to your fathers, the Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people..." (9:4-6) And the rest of the chapter documents this description of them.

Whoever came up with the notion that the Old Testament Torah taught a "save yourself by the merit of your obedience" doctrine, didn't get it from the Torah itself. The redeeming history it rehearses and the theological meaning it gives to those redemptive acts are death to any self-salvation message. In addition to this, it always links Israel's obedience with God's prior grace and redemptive work.

Years ago I read a man who was Mr. Death on legalism. In the course of his argument he said Israel should have said 'no' to God's offer of the Torah. He said God was only putting them to the test and they failed that test by agreeing to do whatever the Torah asked. But Deuteronomy 5:27-28 disagrees with that. Israel says to Moses: "Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey." God's response to that was, "I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good." God knew that they wouldn't keep the word they gave but he did commend the response.

Joshua (24:2) reminds Israel that their forefathers, in the days of Terah and Abraham, worshipped idols beyond the Euphrates. And what is it that redeemed them? God graciously made himself known to Abraham and so the night of idolatry and polytheism began to dawn toward a full blown knowledge of the one true God who gave Israel his covenant name, Yahweh.

Was this a privilege? Was Israel advantaged by this light? Were they blessed when compared to other nations who worshipped things that crawled and rattled and slithered? Paul gives voice to a Jewish protest in Romans 3:1, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew...?" and answers, "Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God." And later, in Romans 9:3-5, the gifts and privileges he says belonged to Israel include "the receiving of the law". God made himself known to Israel as to no other nation and a part of that self-revelation was the Torah.

Moses is thrilled with the privilege he had brought to Israel in the commandments of Torah. He has no thought that he's delivering to them a yoke of bondage. Far from it; in Deuteronomy 4:6-8 he delights to tell them:

Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you this day?

Not everyone was as fortunate or as privileged as those to whom Moses spoke when he said (Deuteronomy 5:2-3): "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today."

And it was when they were called to, "Stand up and praise the Lord your God" that the returnees from exile confessed how good God had been to them down the years delivering them from captivity and sustaining them through the awful wilderness. It was in that celebratory setting that they said, "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good." (Nehemiah 9:5-13)

No wonder Jacob Neusner, probably America's most prolific Rabbi, reminds us that, for the Jews, the Torah finds its place among the gifts of a gracious God: "We thank Thee, Lord our God...for Thy Torah which Thou has taught us, for Thy statutes which Thou has made known to us, for the life of grace and mercy Thou has graciously bestowed on us..." 5 In describing halakhah (the authoritative interpretation of Torah) he remarks, "When people think of law, they ordinarily imagine a religion for book-keepers, who tote up the good deeds and debit the bad and call the result salvation or damnation, depending on the outcome. But when we speak of life under the halakhah law, we mean life in accord with the halakhah, the rules and regulations of a holy life." 6

Agreeing with this viewpoint, Old Testament scholar, Walther Eichrodt, said: "This new saving act by God consists in his giving of the law. In it the Exodus from Egypt reaches its objective...The value set on the law makes it clear that it constitutes the actual divine gift of life...God's law as a new order of society takes a man out of the cursed sphere of sin and remoteness from God, and gives him his place in the living God's sphere of blessing, where the powers of death cannot lay hold on him. This seems to characterize the law of the covenant as the great gift of life...Here is not a set of severe demands made by an arbitrary and alien will, narrowing down life, and subjecting it to a rigid regime of reward and punishment." 7

The gracious nature of the covenantal Torah is stressed not only in the redeeming acts of God which were the prelude to the giving of the Torah, it's cultic service proclaimed the nation's debt to God's amazing grace. B.W. Anderson is surely correct when he says: "Ritual is belief that is acted out by the people in corporate worship or by their representatives, the ministers or priests. In religion what is done in worship is sometimes more important than what is said. Actions may express convictions about God and God's relation to the people more eloquently than words or even specific theological statements." 8

The Christian will think about baptism and the Lord's Supper in this connection. In the Jewish setting, take the Feast of the First fruits as observed corporately and individually. Here's Deuteronomy 26:1-10: When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name and say to the priest in the office at the time, "I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the land the Lord swore to our forefathers to give us." The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me. "Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him.

Notice the repeated confession that the land was "given" to them by God even as he had long ago promised. Note the confession of desperation and utter helplessness and the witness that God listened to their cries, rescued them, brought them safely to the land and richly blessed them.

And there was the Passover that bore witness to God's gracious passing over Israel at the time of judgment on sinners. The feast said, "We should have died and the only reason we are alive and flourishing this day is because of the Lord's goodness and kindness."

The sacrificial system, which included the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), was only possible because God gave them the blood on their altars (Leviticus 17:11) to make atonement. Sinners though they were, the continuing mercy of God extended to them through the sacrificial arrangement enabled them to live in relationship with the holy Lord who was pleased to dwell among them.

In the Torah, the Tabernacle and sacrificial system is not seen as man's self-chosen means of securing God's favor despite sin. In Exodus 39:40 we're told about seventeen times that the Tabernacle and all connected with it was carried out by "Moses...as the Lord commanded him." 9 Moses didn't invent the Tabernacle, priestly or sacrificial system to gain God's good grace by sacrifice; God set it all up and gave it efficacy.

Finally, when Moses came back down the mountain Israel had violated the covenant in the most fundamental way and came under threat of obliteration. Moses pleads on their behalf and the God of all grace extended mercy. They lived because of grace and not merit accrued by deeds. They earned nothing but death and received life as an expression of God's grace.

All this Israel knew! All this the Torah proclaimed! All this meant that there was truth and grace abundant in the ministry of Moses to Israel. See Exodus 32:33.

1. It hardly needs to be said that Moses brought "truth". Paul insists on this in Romans 2:20 and says Christ came to confirm God's truthfulness in light of Torah's promises (Romans 15:8).

2. I think 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 connects well with John 1 in following a contrast. What is prior is glorious, what follows is more glorious. See especially 3:18 as part of the argument.

3. In the phrase "Grace upon grace" the preposition is "anti" which often (Hendriksen and others would say usually) has a substitutionary notion. Both Hendriksen and Morris settle for the substitutionary use in this passage but suggest that the phrase means something like: the Christian has one experience of grace following another. If what I've suggested above has merit, it might be better to see the fullness of God's grace through Jesus Christ replacing the grace that came through Moses. Morris and Hendriksen treat the passage as a contrast between law religion brought by Moses and gospel brought by Christ. I don't think we should understand it that way.

4. This raises questions about Paul's claims about the Torah. I'll say something about these elsewhere, God enabling.

5. An Introduction to Judaism, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1991, page 5. It won't hurt us to note again this phrase in which the Jewish Synagogue service expresses thanks to God, "for the life of grace and mercy Thou has graciously bestowed on us." We read a lot of quotations from evangelical writers which are assigned a "legalistic" thrust. Here's one of many that humbly confesses that life is a gift of grace and mercy.

6. Ibid., page 63

7. Ezekiel, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1970, page 267

8. Contours of Old Testament Theology, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, page 116.

9. In Exodus and Numbers there's a clear defense of Moses against accusations that he seized authority and acted like a dictator. This is probably the immediate point for this



reiteration. Nevertheless, the constant refrain that the Tabernacle and its services were structured by Moses "as the Lord commanded" him establishes the point made above.

## Was God once a legalist? (1)

"You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:5)

Though the word righteousness doesn't occur in the text Paul quotes it twice (Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12) and says it speaks of righteousness that is "of the Torah (law)" and he contrasts it with the righteousness he proclaims in Jesus Christ.

He certainly contrasts the two but precisely in what way does he contrast them?

Typical evangelical thought says that Leviticus 18:5 gives the essential nature of "legalistic righteousness". By this, they tell us, it means righteousness and life that is gained by the moral worth/obedience of the person who stands before God.

By contrast the righteousness proclaimed by Paul in Jesus Christ is completely independent of the moral worth or obedience of the person who stands before God.

It would seem the choice is clear, Leviticus 18:5 which is righteousness via the Law which is legalism and Paul's righteousness by faith which is grace.

But since Leviticus 18:5 is God's command and promise, if there's legalism in it then God is the legalist. Was God a legalist before Christ came at which time he became a gracious God? No one believes that, but if Leviticus 18:5 is legalism God and Moses are implicated in it.

Did Paul think God was promising life on a legalistic basis? Hardly!

Douglas Moo sees the difficulty, denies that Moses is a legalist (though he doesn't give us reasons for letting Moses off the hook) and he reminds us that "life" in the Old Testament doesn't (necessarily) mean eternal life or salvation. He implies that the "life" in Leviticus 18:5 is merely "covenant privilege". So an Israelite could enjoy covenant privilege and the blessings that go with that without being "saved" and so having "eternal life". Moo wants to say that Leviticus is a legalistic passage but doesn't want it related to salvation and that's why he draws the distinction.

Even if it's correct to draw such distinctions it doesn't really ease Moo's problem because if he's right it would still be true that covenant privilege was gained by moral worth and obedience (that is, on a legalistic basis). He offers covenant privilege as a non-grace reward. But Leviticus can't offer covenant privilege as a non-grace reward because there are too many texts and sections that explicitly forbid Israel to believe such a thing. They were debtors to grace from beginning to end. They were debtors to grace for covenant privilege and anything else they enjoyed.

Additionally, Paul uses the Leviticus passage twice [Romans 10 and Galatians 3] and uses it to contrast "righteousness" which of the law and righteousness grounded in a relationship to Christ by faith. Paul doesn't do with it what Moo wants to do with it.

The difficulty seems clear: if Leviticus 18:5 advocates legalism then God and Moses are responsible for it. Paul says God offers "righteousness" in Leviticus 18:5 and not simply "covenant life".

Furthermore, it isn't that Israel turned it into a legalistic system on this view God himself established the system and laid it on those who were already sinners. And while he was doing it, in other places he was saying their relationship with him was sheer grace. Everyone knows that won't work.

But if Leviticus 18:5 is not the essence of legalism we need to re-examine Paul's use of the text. We can't have Paul saying Leviticus 18:5 is legalism if it isn't.

The point he makes doesn't hinge on "doing" but on the identity of the "doer". Leviticus 18:5 isn't laying down a general theology about how one gets "saved".

It isn't speaking to humanity in general. The "you" of the text is Israel. The phrase, "I am the Lord" locks the call of the text into a whole narrative of grace. And the grace that undergirds the text is the grace shown to Israel in particular and not HUMANITY as a whole.

Verses 1-4 spell out the distinctiveness of Israel's relationship with this Yahweh when it forbids them to behave as Egyptians or Canaanites.

Leviticus 18:5 is an Israelite text from beginning to end. It deals with their relationship with God and no one else's. And it is "their" national righteousness; their relationship and life with God that they sought to establish (Romans 10:3).

We couldn't have applied Leviticus 18:5 to Gentiles. Jews would have reminded us that the text, the statutes and ordinances and the promise of the text were from the Lord who gave them exclusively to Israel. See Amos 3:2 and Exodus 19:5.

Paul's point is not that one brand of righteousness and life can be earned (and using Leviticus 18:5 to prove it) and that true righteousness and life is of grace. He never believed such a thing and he certainly didn't think Moses advocated it. Israel missed the full picture of God's righteousness that aimed at humanity because they sought to establish only their own national (Israelite) righteousness that was tied to the covenantal Torah.

Paul's point of contrast between what he proclaimed and what Leviticus promised was the magnitude and range of it. Leviticus offered life and righteousness (by grace) to the doer of the Torah (Israel) and God in Jesus Christ offers life and righteousness to the whole wide world, Israel included, independent of the Torah. Israel thought the righteousness of God found an end in them and Paul shows a righteousness of God (witnessed by the Torah and the prophets) that was through Jesus Christ and for all nations (Romans 3:21-31 and 10:4 and elsewhere).

## **Was God once a legalist? (2)**

The notion that God ever offered life with him to anyone on the basis of their moral worth or the quantity or quality of their obedience is manifestly untrue. Life with God begins and ends with grace. And God never said anything to suggest the contrary! Adam and Eve didn't earn their life with God by obedience or moral worth. God gifted them with life in relationship with himself and asked them to live out the character of that life and relationship. Not even Jesus earned his life with God. His whole earthly life was lived in holy, sinless response to God's prior gracious gift.

That being the case, when we come to God's call and promise in Leviticus 18:5 we're not to understand the text as legalism spelled out. He was offering life. He wasn't offering life by virtue of "doing" or what is called "law keeping".

"You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:5)

This verse is part of the whole narrative and experience of Israel with Yahweh. The Lord made it clear to them that he entered into a covenant with them because he loved them and their fathers and was keeping his promise to their fathers (Deuteronomy 7:8; 8:18; 9:4-6). He made it clear he covenanted himself to them not because they were morally upright or worthy.

"Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your hearts that you are going to possess their land, but in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness...for you are a stubborn people." (Deuteronomy 9:4-6)

When we set Leviticus 18:5 alongside a passage like this it becomes very clear that Leviticus 18 is not advocating life with God on the basis of moral worthiness or the quantity or quality of obedience. Deuteronomy 9 insists it is all God's grace so it makes no sense to understand Leviticus as life on the basis of "law-keeping".

And Leviticus 18:5 only says in different words what Deuteronomy (and many others) say repeatedly. Here are two examples from scores. Deuteronomy 4:1 says, "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, in order that you may live" Deuteronomy 10:12-13 says this, "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you to today for your good."

It is poor biblical interpretation to wrench a text from its grace foundation and call it a text that embodies legalism.

We hear people doing this with New Testament texts and rise immediately to the defense of the New Testament's justification by grace through faith. But one can as easily isolate calls to obedience in the New Testament from their grace setting. In 1 Corinthians 7:19 Paul says, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God." And in Romans 2:6-7, "[God] who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life"

The Romans 2 text is especially pointed. By perseverance in doing good some seek for glory and honor and immortality. How is it they seek for these things? "By perseverance in doing good." And won't God damn them for seeking glory, honor and immortality by persevering in doing good? No, we're told he rewards every person according to his or her deeds. Instead of branding that as legalism and an attempt to gain life by good works God rewards them according to their deeds.

How will God render to every person? According to his deeds! What will he render to some persons? Eternal life! To whom will God give (render) eternal life? To the person who seeks glory, honor and immortality! How does that person seek glory, honor and immortality? By patient perseverance in doing good.

If that isn't legalism why must we construe Leviticus 18:5 to be legalism? Romans 2:6-7 is part of a grace-saturated book. Leviticus 18:5 is part of a grace-saturated Pentateuch.

Whatever else we need to do, we need to revise our view of what Paul says about the Old Testament covenantal torah and we need stop severing glad-hearted obedience from the sheer grace of God.

To protect the honor of God and give glory to him for his grace we completely sever the obedience of faith from the relationship to God without which no one is reconciled or saved. Life, reconciliation or salvation is certainly "gift" but it doesn't exist except as an aspect of a relationship with God.

When we continue to give a specialist meaning to the keeping of God's commands, it generates a reaction in those who over-stress human obedience precisely because it places the human response of faith outside the realm of grace. This inadvertently encourages some people to believe that salvation is indeed by grace plus obedience of faith. It "justifies" those who have a tendency to stress what is often called "man's part" of salvation because they see the obedience of faith as completely distinct from grace.

We dichotomize so severely between grace and the obedience of faith that those who over-stress human response believe us! Knowing that salvation is by grace and also knowing that obedience must be forthcoming if life with God is to be enjoyed they conclude that salvation is by grace and works (obedience).

Still, evangelicals insist that Paul did indeed see Leviticus 18:5 as fitly representing salvation by good deeds as opposed to salvation by grace through faith.

But does Paul so interpret Leviticus 18:5?