

The Purpose of The Law

Our Old Testament readings of late have brought us to consider the giving of the Law of God through Moses. Sometimes, when we go through the details of it, we can lose the overall picture, so for the purpose of our exhortation today we shall consider the basic purpose of the Law. To begin with, we note an aspect that is not often spoken of:

“... we know that the Law is good, if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the **Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient**, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and for profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine ...” (1 Tim 1:8-10).

This is an important aspect of the purpose of the Law: it was to bring condemnation upon the lawless and disobedient etc. It was an all-embracing piece of legislation, the purpose of which was to regulate the behavior of a nation: the nation of Israel. Inculcating Divine principles and precepts, the Law was designed - in the first instance - to be a legal code by which the people were to live their lives. “Every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward” (Heb. 2:2), as it condemned sinners, and provided a means whereby Yahweh’s righteousness could be seen to be upheld in the face of the lawless and ungodly. Concerning this aspect, Paul wrote to the Galatians: “Wherefore then serveth the Law? It was added *because of transgressions* ...” (Gal. 3:19).

The context of this passage of Galatians is a reference to the promise that Yahweh gave to Abraham (see verse 18). The Law was “added” after the promise was given, “because of transgressions” which needed to be dealt with in a judicial manner. Again, the Apostle refers to the Law elsewhere as being “the ministration of death” (2 Cor. 3:7), because it commanded death as the ultimate sanction against those who did not keep it.

In Romans chapter 3, we are told: “by the deeds of the Law there shall be no flesh justified in his sight: for *by the Law is the knowledge of sin*” (Rom. 3:20). This provides us with further information: not only was the Law designed to condemn, but also no man could be counted righteous (the meaning of the word “justified”) through a faultless observation of it. Try as a man might, he could not render perfect obedience, and so was brought under its curse.

The Law was a code that brought “the knowledge of sin”, for it condemned all who lived under it as sinners, worthy of death. It taught man that he was a sinner in need of forgiveness, and provided opportunity for man to humbly accept his position, and throw himself upon the mercy of the Lord to forgive. Romans chapter 7 expounds this aspect in some detail: by setting forth Divine standards as the basis for behavior in life, it gave a knowledge that those things which natural men do, are sinful. So the Apostle taught:

“... the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful” (Rom. 7:13).

Without Law, there is no measure, or standard, by which sinful acts might be demonstrated to be sinful. Without Law, there is no awareness that certain behaviors are not acceptable, and

are to be repented of. But once the Law enters in, those behaviors are seen to fall short of Divine Glory, and are declared to be sinful. So it is, that a prime function of the Law of Moses was to bring a knowledge of sin.

This leaves us with a question: if all the Law did was to condemn, how could those who lived under it be forgiven? Hebrews 7:19 provides the answer:

“... the law made nothing perfect, but *it was the bringing in of a better hope*”
(*marginal rendering*)

Once a man was convicted as a transgressor of the Law, that Law could not make him whole, or righteous. The Law brought a knowledge of sin, but could not remove it. However, it “was the bringing in”, or introduction, “of a better hope”. The Law itself testified of how a man could be made righteous – not by any provision from within itself, but rather by a principle of righteousness by faith and the grace of God. So, Romans chapter 3 instructs us in the passage which we quoted earlier:

“therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the Law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the Law is manifested, *being witnessed by the law* and the prophets; even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:20-22).

Returning to Galatians, the full verse 19 reads:

“Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions till *the seed should come* to whom the promises were made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator” (Gal. 3:19)

This passage demonstrates that the Law was intended to be a temporary arrangement, until Messiah should come. Since the promises to Abraham were made firstly, and preeminently to his Greater Seed, “which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16), the promises could not be given until he was able to receive them. Once he came, however, the Law was to be replaced by a ministration of righteousness, through which a man might be saved. Again, we read a few verses later on: “... the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Gal. 3:22).

Here is an interesting aspect: condemnation was brought upon all who were subject to the Mosaic Law for a stated purpose: that purpose being “that the promise by faith” might be granted to the faithful. This provides us with some insight into the Law of Moses, and it also explains why the promises were made to Abraham before the Law, when it came into force after it. Men were condemned to death as sinners – what should they do? They knew of the promises to Abraham, and so had to exercise faith in those promises – even though they would not have known the precise details by which they would be fulfilled. The Law, in its central system of sacrifice and ordinances for sin foreshadowed the day when Messiah would come as the Seed of Promise. Men were under condemnation, and in their hapless situation, they would need to confess their sins, and their own inability to save themselves. Exercising a godly sorrow that leads to repentance, they recognized their own sinfulness and the need to throw themselves upon the grace and tender mercy of the Lord for their forgiveness.

We find then, that the Law was inadequate in its inability to bring salvation in itself. There was a fault associated with the Law: “for if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second”. But what was that “fault”? Nothing in the Law itself, for it perfectly performed the purpose for which it was given. The apostle continues: “for finding fault *with them*, he saith ...” (Heb. 8:7-8). The fault was man, and his inability to keep the ordinances of God. How could man be saved if he was “without strength” to overcome? This was the “fault”: the Law could not save sinful man. So we read in this same chapter of our Messiah: “but now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). The “more excellent ministry” of Messiah is “better”, for it made provision for men and women to forsake their sins, and be saved.

Concerning this aspect of the Law, it is written that it was: “a shadow of good things to come” (Heb. 10:1). Sometimes we wonder how much the average Israelite would have understood regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. This passage helps us: the Law was “a shadow”. When we see a shadow, the most that we can discern is the outline, or silhouette. We know nothing about the details. In the case of a shadow of a person, we can see that it is a person, but we don’t know what colour skin he has, what his hairstyle is like, whether it is a man or a woman, or many other things that can be seen in full light. The Law was that shadow cast back from the shining of divine glory before Christ. It shows none of the minute details; indeed, these were not made known until much later, when the true light had come. Nevertheless, as a “schoolmaster”, it brought the people forward to the substance that cast the shadow, even Messiah himself.

Matthew chapter 23 records the Master’s reproof to the scribes and Pharisees:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the Law: judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (Mat. 23:23).

From these words, we learn what the “weightier matters of the Law” were. Indeed, when we go through the list, we might be surprised!

1. Judgment: we are familiar with this aspect perhaps more than the others. As we cited earlier, “every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward” (Heb. 2:2).
2. Mercy: is not a quality we readily attribute to the Law, but we have seen that in its condemnation of sinners, it made them turn to the mercy of God for forgiveness.
3. Faith: in our day, it is fashionable to speak of Law versus Faith, or as it is also put: Legalism versus Faith. However, the Mosaic Law was not something separate and in opposition to Faith. In fact, one of its weightiest features was Faith: it taught men and women to trust in the Abrahamic covenant, and have faith in the promises made so many years earlier.

A passage which epitomizes all that we have considered thus far is Ephesians 2:8-9:

“for by grace are ye saved *through faith; and that not of yourselves*: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast”

This is the position that those who lived under the Law would come to recognize, as they learned to trust in Yahweh, being without strength to save themselves.

The example of Abraham is a case in point. Romans chapter 4 demonstrates how that Abraham was justified (considered righteous) through his faith, not his works alone:

“If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham ***believed God***, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:2-3).

The example of the father of the faithful, is that belief, not obedience to Law will give salvation. But what specifically was it that Abraham believed in? The chapter continues concerning him:

“who against hope believed in hope ... and being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body ***now dead***, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet ***the deadness*** of Sarah’s womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief: but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Rom. 4:18-20).

Here was Abraham’s faith – life from the dead! Naturally speaking both Abraham’s body, and that of Sarah, were impotent. They were unable to produce life by natural means. But Abraham believed that God would perform those things that he had spoken, and so gave Him Glory. Interestingly, the passage proceeds to speak of our own position of faith, describing how Righteousness was imputed to Abraham:

“Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him ***that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead ...***” (Rom. 4:23-24)

Notice the point here, Abraham’s faith was in life from the dead (as also expressed in his offering up Isaac as a sacrifice (Heb. 11:17)) – and so is ours! We therefore “walk in the steps of that faith of our Father Abraham” (Rom. 4:12), believing in the promises, and thereby giving glory to God our savior.

Turning back to the position of those who lived under the Law, we saw that the people were all condemned by it. But the Sacrifice is just as efficacious for them, as it is for us. Time is no barrier. So we read the following testimonies:

“by him all that believe are justified from all things ***from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses***”

“and for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions ***that were under the first testament*** they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15)

“when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law ...” (Gal. 4:4-5)

So it was that through faith in the things that the Law testified concerning the good things to come, men and women will be saved from their sins. Whereas “it is not possible that the

blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Heb. 10:4), by faith in what they foreshadowed, the people would be saved through the Sacrifice of Christ, just as we are.

As we come each Sunday to the emblems of bread and wine, depicting Messiah’s death till he come, we do so as members of two families, yet one. Christ has “made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us” (Eph. 2:14). Both Jew and Gentile come together in a common need for forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ. We learn that salvation is established upon better principles than the code of laws given by Moses, though that Law testified of it.

So it is that “we have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle” (Heb. 13:10). The law gave the priests a right to partake of certain of the altar offerings, but it did not grant them a “right” to eat from the Christ-Altar. We come in faith, to that altar, to partake of the benefits of the sacrifice that is laid upon it through grace. “Jesus, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Heb. 12:12-13). We seek salvation in the recognition that we cannot become righteous, and so find forgiveness by any other means. We delight in the law of liberty in which we operate, and look forward to “better” days to come. We eagerly anticipate that time when by contrast to the fading glory of the Law which was to pass away, righteousness will be given to us, and we shall be partakers of that ever increasing glory of the Lord through the Spirit throughout the ages to come.

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