

Prophetic Significance of the Law

A proper understanding of the role of God's Law is essential to understanding prophecy. For in the original rebellion, Satan challenged God's Law; at the tree of temptation he put forth the idea that God's Law (which was reflected in the command not to eat of that one tree) was a burden and a restriction. This idea was accepted by Eve and the fall took place.

Prophecy is all about how God will restore what sin has taken away. He does this by giving back to His people a proper understanding of the righteousness and goodness of His Law. The very first prophecy in the Bible concerns this:

Genesis 3

¹⁵ And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

The serpent and his seed were to bruise the heel of the woman's seed. This represented a wound to the humanity, just as a snake would strike the foot of a man. This was fulfilled when Jesus' human flesh was wounded to death on the cross, by the enmity of Satan and those he could influence.

But the seed of the woman was to bruise the serpent's head. This is a deadly wound, striking at the ideas, thoughts, and teachings of the serpent. Since his first teaching was to put aside God's Law, the bruising of the serpent must involve restoring a right understanding and relationship to that same Law.

In the book of Revelation, the term "commandments" is used three times, and the last verse that uses it is this one:

Revelation 22

¹⁴ Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

It was through breaking the Law that the fall of man took place, and those who enter back into eternal life will be distinguished by their law-keeping.

There is, however, in the Christian world today, also a great enmity against the Law of God. It is derided with such terms as “Old Covenant,” “yoke of bondage,” “impossible to keep,” “burdensome,” “legalism,” and so forth. This is an echo of the original teaching of Satan himself.

Therefore, in this short article, I will deal with a few principles of the Law, and some of the statements in the New Testament that seem to support this modern Christian teaching.

Ephesians 2

¹² Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances.

There is a similar statement in Colossians:

Colossians 2

¹³ Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.

Here it is said that the “handwriting of ordinances” were nailed to the cross. But there is no record of any hand-written document that was nailed to Christ’s cross. What was actually nailed to the cross of Christ? His body! Therefore, it is in the flesh that the “law of commandments contained in ordinances” is found. In the flesh is found this “enmity” that is the secret thing that divides man from man, and man from God.

But how can this be the same as a “law of commandments contained in ordinances”? Consider why God gave the Law:

Romans 5

²⁰ The Law entered that the offense might abound, but where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

The children of Israel, when they came out of Egypt, knew God as their deliverer from temporal bondage. They had been

slaves to the Egyptians, now they were free. But they did not yet realize that they were still in spiritual bondage to the power of sin. So God's first task was to help them see that they were still slaves to sin. "The Law entered that the offence might abound," or in other words, God had the Law spoken and written out so that the people could see their sin and poor spiritual condition. In the New Testament, the same truth is stated:

Romans 7

⁷ ...I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet...

⁹ For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.

But how did the people of Israel receive the Law? Did they see their poor spiritual condition? No! Instead their attitude was expressed like this:

Exodus 19

⁸ All that the Lord has spoken, we will do.
(see also *Exodus* 24:3 and 24:7)

This was their agreement with God: the Old Covenant; man's promise to do what only God can do! This promise proceeded from their flesh...therefore, it was "a law of commandments contained in ordinances", commandments that they would perform by the power of their flesh.

So God gave them a picture: His law written on stone. This symbolized their condition: they knew His commands intellectually, but their hearts were dead as stone. This they proved by worshiping the golden calf just a few days later (*Exodus* 32). But in spite of this, most of them still did not see their need of a Saviour.

To help them further, many gospel lessons were given: the Passover lamb, circumcision, the sanctuary service, the smitten rock from which flowed water. The sacrificial system was considered part of the Old Covenant, because the people felt

that they could do the work of God, therefore God had them act it out in great detail. Yet, of itself, it could not save them.

The problem was not the law, nor the sacrificial service, nor circumcision. It was the pride and self-confidence of their flesh that made them turn these gifts into a way of self-justification. These gifts were intended to be “schoolmasters to lead to Christ” (*Galatians* 3:24), but the people turned them into an “old covenant which leads to bondage” (*Galatians* 4:4).

The problem is that of making a command of God, which only He can perform, into a command that I can do with my fleshly power. This turns the promise of God into an ordinance or ceremony. It becomes just a play act. “Having a form of godliness but denying the power.” (*2 Timothy* 3:5). But more than just simply hypocrisy, this kind of obedience is wearisome, because there will be continual failure. An evil heart simply cannot bring forth the kind of pure-hearted, loving service that the Law requires.

Galatians 3

²⁴ The Law was our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ.

Do men still need to be led to Christ today? Certainly! Then they still need the Law as a schoolmaster.

On the other hand, the “old covenant” led to “bondage” (*Galatians* 4:21-31). Obviously, Christ and bondage are two different ends. Therefore we may be sure that God did not give the Law in order to lead to the bondage of the Old Covenant.

If we bear this distinction in mind, some of Paul’s statements, which have caused confusion, will be plain. In one place, Paul states that:

Galatians 3

¹² ...the Law is not of faith.

Is he referring to the “schoolmaster” or “old covenant”? Obviously, the “old covenant”.

This is confirmed when Christ told the Pharisees that they had “omitted the weightier matters of the law: judgment, mercy, and faith.” (*Matthew 23:23*). How could faith be part of the Law, and yet the “law be not of faith”? Only because we are talking about the Law in two different roles: one as the schoolmaster, the other as the Old Covenant.

A further confirmation of this distinction can be seen by considering Paul’s statement that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” (*Romans 14:23*).

Well then, if the “law is not of faith” and “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” then the law must also be sin! But the same apostle declared,

Romans 7

⁷ Is the law sin? God forbid!

This would be an irreconcilable contradiction if we did not distinguish between the “schoolmaster” and the “old covenant”.

So, the enmity that divided man from God, and man from man, was the principle of self-justification (human pride) trying to pass itself off as obedience to God’s commandments. By allowing His flesh to be crucified, Christ was showing that all human efforts to pay the debt caused by sin were hopeless.

But through the Spirit, through the resurrection, through faith and the “obedience of faith”, the “righteousness of the law” can be “fulfilled in us.” (*Romans 8:4*).

Martin Luther once wrote the following:

The desire of self-justification is the cause of all the distresses of the human heart.

He was right! But this desire of self-justification, which leads men to turn the Law into a yoke of bondage, should never be confused with the Law as God intended it to be: a schoolmaster to lead unto Christ. Those who would enter into

eternal life will make use of the Law as God intended it: to teach them of their sinfulness, and their need of the Saviour, and their need of His power to bring them back into harmony with the principles of God's kingdom as expressed in His Law.

Revelation 22

¹⁴ Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

