

The Law Covenant

Opening Hymn: #17 — “Moses and the Lamb”

Galatians 3:17 (NIV) The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.

Let us look at this “law” that Paul says did “not set aside the covenant [nor] do away with the promise.” We want to examine some of the details associated with the giving of this law, look at why it was given, what were its objectives, and—most importantly—determine when this covenant will come to an end.

What Was the Law Covenant?

When the children of Israel left the land of Egypt under the direction of Moses, they were a nation of slaves and had no experience governing themselves. The customs and practices of the Egyptians were all they knew. But no nation can exist for long without laws since soon there would be nothing but anarchy. So one of the first things God did for them was to give them a number of laws at Mount Sinai.

Deut. 4:13 And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.

The ten commandments epitomize the foundation principles of this law. How wonderful it would be if everyone today at least tried to live according to these principles. But the law consisted of more than these. The listing of the ten commandments at the beginning of Exodus chapter 20 is immediately followed by many other laws extending through the end of chapter 23. Moses collectively referred to these as “statutes and judgments.”

Deut. 4:8 And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

Today governments make laws and people decide whether they will obey them or not. Much depends upon how the government enforces its laws. But at Sinai Moses did not bring back the “ten suggestions” from God. As God’s official representative or mediator, he brought the people a formal contract. God called it a covenant:

Exodus 19:5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my **covenant**, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.

The nation readily agreed. They signed this contract and blood validated it:

Exodus 24:7,8 And [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words.

At this “signing ceremony” Israel agreed to do everything God asked of them. They bound themselves and their children after them to this covenant forever. Undoubtedly they were grateful to God for freeing them from Egyptian bondage and were willing to do anything in return. But they were also afraid because of the lightnings and thunderings. In Exodus 20:19 they asked Moses to speak to them because they were afraid they might die if God spoke to them; they were asking Moses to be their mediator.

What benefits did they expect to get out of this covenant; what was in it for them? Nothing is said about this at the time the law was given. But no matter how sure any Israelite might have been that he could do all these things perfectly, not one thought he would live forever if he actually did so. They expected if they kept their side of the bargain, God would take care of them as he had so far. They were right:

Deut. 28:1,2,5 If thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: and all these **blessings** shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God. [verse 5] Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store.

Deut. 29:9 Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do.

Some believe the law promised everlasting life to those who kept it but that no imperfect human being could keep it. Lev. 18:5 does say if a man keeps the Lord's statutes and judgments he shall live in them, but this verse does not say the man will live **forever** in them. Consider also Deut. 4:40.

Deut. 4:40 Thou shalt keep therefore [God's] statutes, and his commandments, which I [Moses] command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and **that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth**, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, for ever.

Moses says obedience will lead to long life, but he does not say it leads to everlasting life. The "earth" or promised land is what God gave to Israel forever. In Romans 7:10 Paul says the commandment (meaning the law) which was ordained to life, he found to be unto death. But in verse 9 he says he was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and he died. When he was "alive" without the law, he surely does not mean he was living forever because he did not have the law. The meaning of the word "life" is as we find it in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are **Life**, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The Law granted exactly these rights to the Jews to the degree that they kept it.

Unlike the promise made to Abraham so many years before Sinai, the Law covenant was not unilateral as far as God was concerned. The benefits were Israel's only if they kept their part of the bargain. The covenant also contained penalties for non-performance:

Deut. 28:15 But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these **curse**s shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: [verse 17] Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store.

History confirms this has been their experience. When Israel obeyed God, even imperfectly, God blessed them. When they drifted into idolatry and away from him, God punished them in a variety of ways.

Why would God give them a law they could not keep? First of all, they could keep it to some extent. Whenever they did, they were blessed. They never had to keep it perfectly to get its benefits. God always blessed them when they served him with their whole heart. It was only when they left him to worship the idols of their neighbors that they were punished because they were not even trying to keep their part of the covenant. There was another reason why God gave them the law:

Leviticus 20:24 But I have said unto you, Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess it, a land that floweth with milk and honey: I am the Lord your God, which have **separated** you from other people.

God wanted his people to be different from the others. There were perfectly good reasons from a natural standpoint for circumcision, clean and unclean animals, and yes all ten of the commandments. But it was important that Israel see themselves as different from their neighbors. They belonged to God and their behavior would prove it.

To a large extent this covenant has preserved them as a people. They may have been scattered to the four corners of the earth after Titus destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD, but just as Daniel continued

worshipping God in Babylon many Jews continued to follow their Jewish practices as strangers in strange lands. Today the Jew still stands apart. Jews see themselves as a covenant people with a unique relationship to God. The “double” spoken of by Isaiah is over and favor is returning to them:

Isaiah 40:2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

One period of 1845 years of what was generally favor began with the death of Jacob and it ended in 33 AD; a double or corresponding period of 1845 years of what was generally disfavor began to count at that time and it ended in 1878—the year Petah Tiqwa was established by the Jews in Israel.

There was one more reason—a most important reason—for giving the law covenant:

Galatians 3:23-29 [Phillips] Before the coming of faith we were all imprisoned under the power of the Law, with our only hope of deliverance the faith that was to be shown to us. Or, to change the metaphor, the Law was like a strict governess in charge of us until we went to the school of Christ and learned to be justified by faith in him. Once we had that faith we were completely free from the governess' authority. For now that you have faith in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God. All of you who were baptized “into” Christ have put on the family likeness of Christ. Gone is the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female—you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, you are true descendants of Abraham, you are true heirs of his promise.

The Law had a work to do for a certain period of time, but for those who “went to the school of Christ and learned to be justified by faith in him,” they were no longer under the Law. In fact, they were the “true heirs of the promise,” the promise that was made to Abraham so many years before the Law was ever given.

When Will the Law Covenant End?

What relationship does the New Covenant have to the Law Covenant? Answer: the New covenant is the covenant the Lord makes with Israel when their old Law Covenant ends:

Romans 11:25-27 Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.

The New Covenant takes the place of the Law Covenant; it is in a sense an antitype to the typical Law Covenant. Thus it is important to know if the Law Covenant has ended because if it has not, then the New [Law] Covenant cannot be operational.

When does the Law Covenant end? When it was given, God did not say it was for a specific time after which it would be null and void. If it had ended at the cross as some believe, there would have been no reason to delay sending the gospel message to the Gentiles for 3½ years since there would no longer be any basis to favor the Jew. Clearly God still considered them as having a special relationship to him because there was a delay. Jesus himself said in Matthew 5:17 that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil it. If the law arrangement really ended at the cross, Jesus did not speak the truth.

Time and time again, Paul describes unbelieving Israel as a nation still under the Law:

Rom. 3:30,31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

1 Cor. 9:20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; **to them that are under the law**, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law;

Galatians 4:24,26 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai [clearly the Law covenant], which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem **which now is, and is in bondage with her children.**

Galatians 5:2-4 If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that **he is a debtor to do the whole law.** Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. [*The law was in effect for the Jew without Christ.*]

Hebrews 8:13 In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old **is ready to vanish away** [it's not gone yet!].

The apostle Paul says Sarah and Hagar were types. Sarah was the wife of Abraham long before there was a Hagar. But Sarah was barren; Hagar as surrogate wife was an interim arrangement. Although it might look as though Hagar's seed would inherit the promises made to Abraham, that did not happen. Hagar and her son were put out into a wilderness condition. But notice: neither Hagar nor her son died. They continue to live. In fact, there is close communication between Isaac and Ishmael because when Abraham died, Ishmael is summoned and is present at the burial:

Genesis 25:9 And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.

Likewise in the antitype: "Now **we**, brethren, as Isaac was, **are the children of promise**" (Gal. 4:28). That's because we are counted as children of the Abrahamic promise through his true wife Sarah. The Law Covenant is still in force over the unbelieving Jew just as Ishmael continued to live when the promises became Isaac's. In fact for a Jew there is only one way to escape the Law Covenant: he must die. In Romans Paul makes this point by comparing it to the marriage covenant:

Rom. 7:1,2,4 (NIV) Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. [verse 4] So my brother, **you also died to the law** through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.

Romans 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness **to every one that believeth.**

Any Jew who in faith accepts Jesus Christ "dies" to the law. Few have done that. All other Jews remain under the law until they actually die. Then, in the resurrection, they will come back and be blessed under a different covenant, a new covenant arrangement:

Jeremiah 31:31-33 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake ... I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

But this new covenant cannot be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah until their old law covenant has ended.

Nailing It To His Cross

Col. 2:14 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.

What do these words mean? In spite of the united testimony of the apostle Paul that the unbelieving Jew was still under the Law, many have read these words and said the Law must have ended at the cross. That is not what the apostle is saying.

First, let us consider the word “nailing.” We can’t explore the meaning of the Greek word in other texts because there aren’t any. The Greek word does not mean “cease.” If Paul wanted to say that, he would have used either of two Greek words that are so translated. This Greek word means “nail.” When Martin Luther nailed his “95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenburg in 1517, did he abolish them? No! He publicized them; he displayed them. There was nothing “nailed to the cross” except the man Christ Jesus. In his death on the cross Jesus drew attention to the law. He showed that he as a perfect man could keep it.

The keeping of the law did not give Jesus life any more than the law gave Adam life. Both Adam and Jesus were created perfect; both possessed everlasting life from the start. Although it was something both had, it was also something both could lose by disobedience. No one took Jesus’ life from him. He willingly sacrificed it (see John 10:18).

“All Jews who have not accepted Christ are still bound by every provision and regulations of their Law Covenant, and, as the apostle explains, they can get freed from it only by accepting Christ as the end of the Law—by believing.” (Vol. 6, page 379)

“[Question] Did not the Law Covenant end at the time of our Lord’s death? And if it was a type or a foreshadowing of the New Covenant, would not that be the time for the New Covenant to begin?

[Answer] Many make the mistake of supposing that the Law Covenant ended at the cross. On the contrary, the terms of that covenant are binding upon every Jew from the day in which the covenant was made to the present time. ... For any Jew to get free from the Law Covenant before the inauguration of the New Covenant in the times of restitution, he must die to the law.”

—R4504 [1 Nov. 1909]—short article reproduced on last page)

The Apostle Paul never taught the Jews that they were *free* from the Law—but, on the contrary, that the Law had dominion over each of them so long as he lived. He showed, however, that if a Jew accepted Christ, and became “*dead with him*,” it settled the claims of the Law Covenant upon such Jew, and made him God’s *freeman* in Christ. (Rom. 7:1-4)—Volume 6, p. 229

What This Means To Us

Because God has opened our eyes, we know what the apostle meant when he said that the promises were made to Abraham and his seed ... “and to thy seed” which is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

Galatians 3:26,27,29 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. [verse 29] And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Romans 4:13-14 For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Because of God’s grace, we are counted as “children of the promise.” “Sarah” is our mother as she was Isaac’s mother. It may have taken a long time before her “seed” materialized, but in the type she predated Hagar. We are not a product of the Law Covenant. And we are not a product of the antitypical New [Law] Covenant which comes into force when the [Old] Law Covenant ceases.

However, we can learn much from the experiences of Israel. Our covenant, like theirs, is not unilateral: there are conditions attached. The benefits that have been promised to us will be ours only if we remain faithful, if

we do our part. As we see from Israel's history, a good start is not enough. Keeping faithful to God is a life-long challenge and we dare not become complacent. That is the road to death.

Hebrews 10:38 Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.

If we are faithful even unto death, we will receive "the" crown of life, eternal life. As the bride of Christ, we will be associated with him as ministers of the New [Law] Covenant, a covenant that will bring everlasting life to Israel, and through Israel, to the entire world of mankind.

2 Cor. 3:5,6 (RSV) Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

May we never lose sight of what God has done for us. May we serve him faithfully all the days of our life so that in the future we may dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:6).

Closing Hymn: #54 — "Free from the law"

[First given at the Phoenix Convention, December 2000]

Related articles: R4320 [Jan. 17, 1909]—“The Law Covenant was annulled at the cross.” Also:

THE ANTITYPE BEGINS WHERE THE TYPE ENDS—R4504 [Nov. 1, 1909]

Did not the Law Covenant end at the time of our Lord's death? And if it was a type or a foreshadowing of the New Covenant, would not that be the time for the New Covenant to begin? If the New Covenant will not be ratified until the last member of the Church of Christ has suffered with the Head, would not that imply a considerable interim between the fulfillment of the type and the coming of the antitype? And has it not been THE WATCH TOWER'S teaching that where the type ceases the antitype surely begins?

As we have already pointed out on previous occasions many make the mistake of supposing that the Law Covenant ended at the cross. On the contrary, the terms of that Covenant are binding upon every Jew from the day in which the Covenant was made to the present time--as St. Paul says, "The Law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth." (Rom. 7:1.) Every Jew to-day is under a death condemnation, by virtue of that Law which he is under, yet cannot keep. There are only two possible ways of his getting free from that bondage:

(1) With the end of this age the great High Priest will antitypically offer the blood of "the Lord's goat" "for the sins of all the people"; and this will include the sins of Israel. And then the blessed opportunities of the New Covenant will be opened to them, as God promised. (Jer. 31:31; Rom. 11:27-31.) Then their eyes will be opened and they will see out of their obscurity and gladly accept the Mediator of the New Covenant and begin at once to share that Covenant's blessings.

(2) For any Jew to get free from the Law Covenant before the inauguration of the New Covenant in the times of restitution, he must die to the Law. As St. Paul declares, "The Law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth." "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the Law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead." (Rom. 7:1,4.) This is in full accord with the Apostle's statement, "Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth"--to the extent of becoming a follower of Christ and consecrating his restitution rights in death, a living sacrifice, following the example of his Redeemer. (Rom. 10:4.) The present being the time appointed of the Father as the "acceptable year of the Lord" (Isa. 61:2), the "acceptable time" when God is willing to receive sacrifices (first the sacrifice of Jesus, and, subsequently, the sacrificing of those justified by his blood, his followers, who present their bodies (Rom. 12:1), the Jews have as good an opportunity of thus entering into joint-heirship with Christ, the Spiritual Seed of Abraham, as have the Gentiles. And they have no better opportunity, because there is no other name and no other manner now open to any to obtain a share in the "high calling" to the divine nature, glory and honor.

St. Paul, in writing to the Galatians, warning them against coming under the domination of the Law, does not at all intimate that the Law Covenant had passed away or become dead. On the contrary, he testified that if any would be circumcised they would become "a debtor to do the whole law." (Gal. 5:3.) In the Epistle of Hebrews St. Paul mentions the fact that the New Covenant was promised and that the very intimation of the word new signified that the Law Covenant had become old, and hence was "ready to vanish away" and lose its force entirely. But he did not say that it had passed away. His plain teaching was that those who by faith accepted the Lord Jesus and became dead with him by baptism into his death were thus made "free from the Law" and were thereafter "not under the Law [Covenant] but under the Grace [Covenant--the Abrahamic Covenant.]"-- Gal. 5:18.

One Scripture more requires to be mentioned on this line: "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was contrary to us (Hebrews), and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." (Col. 2:14.) This signifies, not that the Law Covenant was abrogated or done away, but that, so far as the Jews who had accepted Christ were concerned, the demands of all of the Law's ordinances were fully met for them by the Lord Jesus when he was nailed to the cross.

Another evidence that the Law Covenant did not cease when Jesus died, and has not yet ceased, is furnished us in the type of Hagar and her son Ishmael. The Apostle tells us that Hagar allegorically represented the Law Covenant and that Ishmael symbolically represented fleshly Israel, the children of that Covenant. He cites the fact that when the heir, Isaac, was born, the son of the Sarah Covenant, God said to Abraham, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman." (Gal. 4:30.) This signifies that the Law Covenant and its Jewish children were to be outcast from Divine favor for a time. If Hagar had died at that time, the teaching of the type would have been that the Law Covenant ceased then to exist. But Hagar continued to live, and so the Law Covenant was continued, and still has power over every Jew as long as he liveth. If we trace the type further we find that subsequently Hagar returned and was subject to her mistress, and Ishmael, who represented the Israelites, received later a blessing from Abraham, who represented God.

So then, the Law Covenant did not pass away when our Lord Jesus died, nor when he arose from the dead the antitype of Isaac. Consequently the antitypical New Covenant was not ushered in at that time. Nevertheless, as we have heretofore pointed out, when our Lord presented himself in baptism, saying, "Lo, I come to do thy will, O God" (Heb. 10:7), he set aside the first (the typical) sacrifice that he might establish the second (the antitypical) sacrifice. The three and a half years of his own sacrificial ministry were typified in the killing of the bullock of the day of atonement. Immediately on his ascension, applying his blood on our behalf for our reconciliation to the Father that we might become his joint-sacrificers, he at once began the secondary part of the Day of Atonement sacrifices--the killing of "the Lord's goat" taken "from the people" and whose blood would subsequently be applied "for all the people."

This sacrificing of the Church, in one sense, was done by the great High Priest on the Day of Pentecost. But it has been a progressive work, and all of the sacrifice is not yet accomplished, and will not be until the last member of the Body shall have gone into sacrificial death, in the Redeemer's footsteps. Thus we see that the setting aside of the type and the establishing of the antitype required a long period. And this Atonement Day matter, while all-important, was by no means the only typical feature of the Law Covenant. Did it not foreshadow the coming out of the High Priest in garments of glory and beauty to bless the people? And is not this feature of the Law still unfulfilled? And can it pass away before this fulfillment? We hold that it cannot, and that the instant of its passing away will be the instant in which the New Covenant will come into force with the same people--Israel.