

Chapter Four

The Background of the Law

If you want to read a hair-raising, frightening, dramatic story of dreadful convulsions of nature, I suggest the account of the giving of the Law of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19 we read:

“And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled....And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly” (Exodus 19:16,18)

In this dramatic setting God gave to Israel His holy Law of commandments. It is a climactic change in God’s approach to the nation. Before this, God had dealt in grace and mercy – but Israel did not appreciate God’s grace, was not conscious of the meaning of God’s goodness and mercy, and imagined that they could by their own work and obedience please God. When Moses proposed placing them under Law, they had said, *“All that the Lord hath spoken we will **do**.”* So the Lord said, *“You need to learn that you cannot do it at all. I’ll give you the Law, My perfect Law. You will learn if you can keep it or not.”* Notice the immediate change in the tone of Jehovah to Israel after they had declared they did not want grace, for they could *“do”* it – they could *“keep the Law”* – themselves. Read the result:

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud...” (Exodus 19:9).

Clouds now appear, hiding God’s face. The Lord continues saying,

“Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes” (Exodus 19:10).

God, in essence says, *“Here is the Law for you! It comes with ceremonialism, observances, and places a barrier between Me and you.”* Now let’s follow the rest of the record:

“And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death” (Exodus 19:12)

God says, *“He will be put to death!”* The Law has come and is *“**the minister of death.**”* *“Come not near, lest you die!”* How differently grace pleads. Grace says,

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

And grace says, “*him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out*” (John 6:37). “Grace says, “*Let him that is a thirst come, and take the water of life freely*” (Revelation 22:17). That is the language of grace. But the Law says, “*Set bounds, let them not come near, lest they die*” – ***keep away!*** The Law kills -- grace makes alive!

“There shall not an hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live”
(Exodus 19:13)

To be overtaken in the fault of touching the mount, meant death. That was the Law. But when grace speaks it says, “*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, **restore such an one***” (Galatians 6:1). That is grace! The two are not only different, but work the opposite in the dealing with sin.

Then in the following two verses (14-15), there is added still more ceremonialism and the Israelites are commanded, “*not to come at their wives.*” – [That is, husbands were to abstain from sexual relationship during certain days] – But grace says, “*Marriage is honorable in all, and he bed undefiled*” (Hebrews 13:4). And so we might go on to show the contrast of Law and grace. In the balance of the 19th chapter of Exodus we have a further picture of the effect of the Law, in the smoke, the trembling of the mount, and the fear of the people. What a picture of what the Law does! It brings fear and puts men under bondage, and is the “yoke” that the New Testament says neither you nor your fathers were able to bear (Acts 15:10).

Then follows the 20th chapter with the Law given on the tables of stone. In the first two verses (the prologue) God again reminds them of the fact that it is the same God who by grace led them out of Egypt, who is now giving them ***at their own request***, the Law. Read these words:

“And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:1-2).

God reminds them of the fact that they were under grace, before He gives them the Law. It is a biting reminder and a sharp rebuke for their presumptuousness in saying, “*All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.*” Now then, O children of Israel, if you want to be saved by the code of “do’s”, here it is, and He gives the Law – a series of commands and prohibitions: *thou shalt not, thou shalt not, thou shalt not, and thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt*, etc. God said, “*Here is Law for you; Live up to that if you can.*” God gave them a Law. There could be no better Law – it was perfect and good. But, because the Law is perfect and just, it ***must punish all who made even the slightest breach of its demands.***

“Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Galatians 3:10).

God gave them the Law – the Law that cursed and condemned. Israel had refused grace, so *the Law was added* – the Law that could not save; the Law that was the ministry of death; the Law that condemned all who tried to be saved by its works. Then

see the result in the verses that follow the giving of the Law. These verses are seldom by those who believe that we are to keep the Law. But this verses goes belongs with the Law. Add the thunderings and the lightnings and the smoke and the trembling mount, and the still more trembling people crying,

“And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19)

If you want to cling to the Law, then take all the Law and all the trimmings that go with it. Here then we have seen the beginning of the Law amid the thunders of judgment and condemnation. It was to demonstrate that man could not be saved by *“doing”* – by keep rules and regulations – or, by works. The Law could not give peace, but could only gender fear; not bring us to God but separate us from Him instead. The Law God gave was perfect, therefore imperfect man could not keep it; it is holy, and therefore sinful man are condemned by it. It was a just Law, and therefore must punish the transgressor.

The natural question is, *“If man cannot be saved by keeping the Law, how can he be saved?”* The answer is, *“The only way that man can be saved is by God’s grace.”* Remember that is was under this grace that Israel was delivered from Egypt. And this grace remained, as the only hope of Israel, even after God gave them the Law. ***The Law did not take the place of grace.*** Grace was not removed to make place for the Law. No, indeed, the grace of God remained, for if Israel had been placed simply under the law, they would have perished immediately.

This is the force of the words of Paul in answer to the question, *“Wherefore then serves the Law?”* We have seen the answer – *“It was added”* – added to grace. For over sixteen hundred years Israel was under that perfect Law, yet not one single person was ever saved by keeping that Law. And they ended up after sixteen hundred years, committing the capital crime of the universes by nailing to the cross the only Man who ever did keep the Law of God perfectly – that, of course, was Jesus Christ. The Law was given to prove that man cannot keep the Law to be saved, and thus make him willing to receive the grace of God, without the works of the Law. Here then we have the *beginning* of the Law. It was added at Sinai, not to replace grace, but added to grace. Every Israelite believer during the entire age of the Law from Sinai to Calvary was still save by grace. Let’s look at the *“end of the Law”* – Paul says:

“It was added . . . till the seed should come” (Galatians 3:19).

The meaning of *“the seed”* is explained in Galatians 3:16,

“Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

At Calvary the age of Law ended. Jesus had kept its precepts perfectly for thirty-three years and then went as the perfect *“Man,”* the last Adam, to Calvary and paid the penalty of the broken Law, and cried, *“It is finished.”* And to prove He had fully paid he penalty that was *“death,”* He arose the third day from the tomb.

As a result the believer today is “free from the Law” (Romans 8:2); “delivered from the Law” (Romans 7:6); and “dead to the Law” (Galatians 2:19). The Law is not dead, but we are dead to the Law! The Law is very much alive. It is still the expression of God’s perfect holiness and judgment upon the sinner. But for the believer the penalty has been borne by Christ, and now we serve the Lord, not out of fear of judgment and punishment, but because of love for our Savior for such a great salvation.

The question that comes to mind is, “Don’t we need the Law today to show us the awfulness of sin?” The answer is, “Yes, the Law does reveal sin as a transgression. But this is not the full answer.” On the surface it would seem that we would need the Law, but we have something else that shows and reveals the terribleness of human nature like no Law ever could. We have the cross. Look at that cross and see what sin did to Him. Do you want a picture of man’s corrupt nature? Then see that howling mob at the foot of the cross. Do you want a picture of what sin is and what it will do? Then leave Sinai, and go to Calvary and there you see sin as it is. A nation that had boasted in the Law for sixteen hundred years and yet at the end of it all, they nailed the Son of God to the tree.

See Christ as He grovels in the Garden, the great drops of bloody sweat pouring upon the ground. What drove Him there? It was our sins! See Him as He looks into the cup that His Father gave Him. See that cup into which all our sins and failures – every sin we have ever committed was squeezed, until the content of that cup became the very embodiment of the dregs of Hell. See His back, grooved with the cruel lashes, His brow pierced with cruel thorns. See Him as they spit upon Him and strike Him in the face, as they rudely pluck the hairs from His blessed cheek. Follow Him, as they lead Him to Calvary. See Him there with sunken eyes and heaving chest, as “God makes Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Hear Him as He sends that soul-piercing cry to Heaven, “My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?” See Him as He breathes His last. His sweet frame quivers for a moment, the hollow eyes stare one more with pit, as He utters, “It is finished!” Here we can see what sin does, and if we cannot see it here, surely there is no Law that can reveal it unto us. The Law ceased at Calvary for the believer, because it was superseded by something that would show the awfulness of sin as no Law, however, perfect, could ever show.

And, keep in mind that He was *innocent!* He was the same One who made the world! He said, “Before the world was, I am.” He was in the beginning with the Father. Yet see what sin did to Him. It is here at Calvary that we have the picture of naked sin in all its horror. On that cross we see not only sin, but we see the remedy as well. There the Law with its curse came to an end, having done its work and having done it perfectly. The man or the woman who still can cling to the Law in this day and age, has never yet see the cross in its full light of redemption. If a vision of the cross of Calvary will not convince a man of sin, the Law never will. Anyone who can stand there and see what his miserable sins have done to the Son of God and not be moved by it, need never expect to be moved by the Law. The preaching of the Law will never save a soul until the cross is put in its place. Jesus did not say, “If the Law be lifted up,” but rather He said, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto Me.” Paul did not say, “God forbid that I

*should glory, `save in the Law of Moses,`” but, he said, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” Preaching Law may bring fear and trembling, and may fill the church with trembling church member, but the preaching of the cross is the power of God unto *salvation*.*

One can go to the Law, that reveals the eternal expression of what God expects of man, if they want to be saved by their own work and *righteousness*; but, for them to be saved, they must turn from their own efforts to the finished work of Christ on the cross. The Law shows us our sinfulness, but it can never take away our sin. This is the work of God’s wonderful grace. This is the way of salvation!