

Chapter Eight

The Limitations of the Law

“For the Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Man lived for over twenty-five hundred years without a written Law. The Ten Commandments – written on tables of stone – were given by God through Moses and given to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew nothing of these commandments written on tables of stone. They were under another law, the law of *conscience*. As soon as man sinned and Adam fell, he became aware of this *“law of conscience.”* The tree of the knowledge of good and evil may very well be called the tree of *conscience*. Before he fell, man knew no evil, but as soon as he sinned he was accused by a conscience that he did not possess before this. Satan had promised this, for in the temptation he had said:

“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Immediately, after the fall, man acquired a consciousness of guilt, as evidenced by his frantic effort to hide his nakedness and to avoid meeting God. He as yet knew nothing of the Law or the Ten Commandments, but he did have within him a voice that told him some things were inherently, morally wrong. This was the *“law of conscience.”* This consciousness of guilt, this sense of right and wrong, is the universal possession of all men. There is not a people or tribe on the face of the earth, no matter how uncivilized, that does not know that it is wrong to steal, wrong to kill, wrong to lie, wrong to commit adultery. Conscience alone teaches man that these things are wrong, without a written Law. Listen to Paul as he says:

“For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14).

What is this law that Paul mentions here? It is the law of conscience that condemns them, for Paul adds, after saying that the Gentiles without the Law are a law unto themselves,

“Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Romans 2:15).

Paul does not say that the Gentiles have God’s Law written in their hearts, but the *work* of the Law, that is condemnation. Conscience condemns man, and by his conscience he will be judged. Now man was under this law of conscience for 2,500 years before God gave His written Law on Sinai. Paul tells us the law was *four hundred and thirty years after* God’s covenant to Abraham (Galatians 3:17).

This law of conscience was an unreliable guide for man, for it only convicted him of things committed against his fellow man, such as stealing, lying, murder, etc., as later embodied in the second table of the Law. But conscience could not teach man anything about his duty toward God. He had no conscience concerning the first four commandments embodied in the first table of the Law. That called for a supernatural revelation. How did man know it was wrong to serve other gods, when he had received no law against it, and did not know the true God? How could man know it was wrong to worship idols when it had never been prohibited? How did the Gentiles who did not have the Word of God know it was sin to use the name of God in vain? They didn't even know the name of the true God. How did they know anything about the Sabbath-breaking when the Sabbath law was utterly unknown to them, and was not given until upon Mount Sinai, 2,500 years after man was created back in the Garden of Eden? All these things conscience could not reveal to man.

Man's Conscience Was Flexible

Conscience is not a reliable guide, because conscience varies in different individuals. Conscience permits some people to do some things that are considered evil and wicked by others. And also, conscience may be dulled, seared, or may become weak or imperfect. The Lord permitted the Gentiles to live under this law of conscience, and, this law will judge them. They will be held accountable for what they *did* know, not by what they did *not* know. Under conscience there could, of course, be no improvement, and so when Israel left Egypt, God gave them a new revelation contained in the "*Law*" of commandments, laws, ordinances, and precepts, to real how far short man under conscience had come, and to reveal the awfulness and exceeding sinfulness of sin. This then was the beginning of the Law, when it had been proven that the elastic, flexible conscience of man could never show him his real condition before God. Paul asks the question, "*Wherefore then serves the Law?*" in Galatians 3:19, giving the Law dispensational in character.

The Bible gives a number of reasons that I will attempt to take up in detail. We could classify the answer to Paul's question as follows: The Law was . . .

1. *dispensational* in character;
2. *national* in its demands;
3. *exemplary* in its purpose;
4. *demonstrational* in its application; and
5. *final* in its condemnation.

Let's look at each one in some detail. The question was, "*Wherefore then serves the Law?*" It is an important question, because if the Law cannot serve, cannot justify, cannot sanctify, cannot keep us then what good it is anyway?

First of all the Law was *dispensational* in character. There were 2,500 years when man was without this Law. It was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and was fulfilled on Calvary. And today we live in the dispensation of the grace of God.

The Law Was National

Second, the Law was national; that is, it was given to one definite, particular nation, the nation of Israel. Don't misunderstand, this does not mean that the Law was not *for us*, but it was not given *to us*. To be sure, the Law contains the eternal statement of the will of God. It is God's declaration to all the world, laying down the requirements of a holy God. It is the perfect expression of God's holiness, eternally true. But the Law was given to the nation of Israel as an example, as we will see later. To indicate the national character of the Law, notice how the Law opens:

"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).

It is addressed to the nation of Israel. It, of course, is legitimate to have the Law apply to our self as presenting God's perfect will however, the primary interpretation is that the Law was given to the nation of Israel. The reason for this we will discuss later. This national character of the Law is clear from the passage we referred to previously:

"For when the Gentiles, which have not the law..."
(Romans 2:14).

In describing the Gentiles nations who had violated the law of conscience, Paul says:

"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Romans 3:19).

Exemplary

This verse in Romans 3:19 tells us the Law was given to Israel as an example in order to stop every mouth that would claim that the Law could bring salvation. Paul's says the law was given to Israel as a test, in order that the whole world, including Israel, might be found guilty before God. God gave one-nation advantages that no other nation ever enjoyed, and the failure of this nation to keep the Law made it unnecessary to give His Law to less-favored people. This proved that no man, in his own ability could ever fulfill the Law. No further proof was needed. For over 1,500 years Israel lived under this Law, under the most salutary conditions, and yet at the end of fifteen centuries not one single Israelite had been saved by the Law. The experience of Israel – (for to them alone this Law was revealed.) – proved that the law could not change the human heart. You ask, *"What was wrong with that Law that is failed to save a single individual?"* The answer is **nothing!** Nothing was wrong with the Law. It was the human heart that was wrong. By the proving this to Israel – and the rest of the world – God proved to man that salvation could not be by the Law. It proved the Law's perfection when imperfect men could not keep it. If the nation of Israel was unable to keep that Law of God, then it follows that no one else can, for God gave this nation every advantage: a separated homeland, a revelation of Himself, a holy priesthood, godly prophets; and yet, with all these advantages, they failed.

An Example

To illustrate the giving of the Law to Israel in order to prove to the whole world that it could not save anyone, imagine a farmer from Central America moving to northern Canada. He rents a 640-acre farm and tells the owner of the farm he plans to raise bananas. However, the landlord objects and tells him that it cannot be done. Neither the soil nor the climate is adapted to producing bananas. But the man insists, saying he has had years of experience raising bananas in the tropics, while the Canadian farmer says he has had years of experience farming in Canada and *know* it cannot be done. But the banana man insists, and so to prove its impossibility and to convince the tenant of his folly, the owner gives his consent. He decides to set aside just one acre of the best-suited ground of the entire farm. No use planting the whole 640 acres in bananas until it is first tested and proven on the most likely place. A spot is chosen in the lee of the mountain, with south exposure. Here the soil is the best and the temperature the highest. The ground is thoroughly worked, liberally fertilized, and the best of plants are procured, and all summer the best of care in cultivating the plants is given. But in August there is a frost and the crop fails, No bananas!

Not discouraged, the man tries it again the next year, for after all, you can't judge by one season. The second year it is the same early frost, and then the third year the frost comes in July. They try it another year – same result. No bananas! And then he tries another and another year. Now, suppose they try it for *fifteen hundred years* and yet no bananas. Finally the boss says, "*Now are you convinced you cannot raise bananas on this farm in Canada?*" But the man says, "*Let's try it out on the rest of the farm.*" This would be folly, for if it cannot be done on the most likely and advantageous spot, it certainly cannot succeed under less favorable circumstances.

Israel – God's Garden

This illustration should make clear the statement of Paul in Romans 3:19-20,

"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 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" (Romans 3:19-20).

Israel's experience was to show the impossibility of salvation by the Law – *no bananas!* The Law was given to Israel to stop the mouths of all the world who would teach salvation by the Law. God gave the law to the most favored nation in the world. Israel imagined she could keep God's Law. So God gave them a Law – a perfect, holy and just Law. Then He planted Israel in the promised, sheltered land of Canaan. He drove out their enemies for them. He gave them a ritual and the oracles and ordinances. He gave them priests, and godly prophets to teach them. Under the most promising and helpful circumstances He gave them a perfect Law to keep, and after 1,500 years it was a complete failure – *no bananas*. Does God have to test it out on the rest of the world? Does He have to permit us to try it? The answer, of course, is *No!* Scripture

teaches that every mouth has been stopped. The whole world is proven guilty before God.

When Israel had proven that the Law could not save, because it was not intended to do so. God sent His Son into the world *to keep the Law and pay its penalty, suffer its condemnation, and curse*, and now offers salvation full and free through grace by faith in Him who,

“... hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

We must abandon all hope of saving our self, and cast our self on the mercy and grace of God, receive Christ, and let Him impute to us, not the condemnation of the Law, but its perfect righteousness.

“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (Galatians4:4-5).