

G R A C E

S O U N D O F

... it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace ... Hebrews 13:9

Issue 142 November 2007

Studies in Galatians—Part Ten Galatians 3:10-14 John G. Reisinger

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:10-14 KJV)

Galatians 3:10 begins a new paragraph containing a new argument. Earlier, Paul had argued that both the personal experience of the Galatians and the testimony of

Scripture contradicted the message of the Judaizers (3:1-5). Then he argued from the promise to Abraham (3:6-9). Now he will argue against the Judaizers by using their own appeal: the Mosaic law. In order to understand Paul's point, we must understand the phrase he uses to introduce his argument: "as many as are of the works of the law." This refers to anyone who is expecting that he or she will earn favor or justification before God by obeying the law. Paul declares that anyone who has such a hope is self-deluded. Those who seek to be justified by keeping the law must realize that they already have broken the law and therefore al-

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Worldliness – Part Seven – Gleanings from Psalm 106

Reid A. Ferguson

William Shakespeare was a glorious playwright, but a lousy theologian. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he puts these words in the mouth of Juliet:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.¹

¹ *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. W. G. Clark and W. Aldis Wright (Garden

Any English literature professor would be quick to tell you Will's point. What matters is what something is, not what we call it. Does Shakespeare have a valid viewpoint? Well, yes, and no. It matters that poison is not water. Calling poison water does not change the poison into water. In this respect, what we call it does not matter. But it *does* matter if we put poison into a bottle labeled WATER. In this case, we cannot say that the label makes no difference. The label might be both deceptive and deadly. So we agree that a rose by any other name would indeed smell as sweet; but we dare not say that what we call it

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City: Nelson Doubleday, n.d.), 2.2.38-48. References are to act, scene, and lines.

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ready are under its curse. It is spiritual insanity for me to look to the law for help in earning the favor of God when that law already has cursed me. The same law cannot bless and curse the same people at the same time. Paul not only shows how the very nature of the case shows its absurdity, he shows the same thing from Scripture itself. Thus, he shows that salvation by obedience to the law is both unreasonable and unscriptural. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 to prove that his point is the biblical position.

Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen.

When Israel went into Canaan, Moses and the elders told the people to inscribe the law with its curses and promised blessings on large plastered stones. Representatives from half the tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim and read the blessings in store for those who obeyed the law. Members of the remaining six tribes were to stand on Mount Ebal and read the curses waiting to befall those who disobeyed the law. Then the Levites were to declare to all the people of Israel a list of eleven individual, specific curses, to which all the people were to give vocal assent. Verse 27 follows this list and contains the sum and substance of the entire list. The verse literally means, “*cursed is he who maketh not to stand the words of this law.*” In other words, those who obey the precepts make them stand; those who disobey do what lies in their power to overthrow them.

Paul then quotes Habakkuk 2:4a to demonstrate the outcome of this principle: “*The just shall live by faith.*” The *New Scofield Reference Bible* says this about Habakkuk 2:4:

Here is the central theme of the Bible. The cause of life and death is presented. Trust in God brings life (Gen. 15:6; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 6:23); pride leads

to death, because it will not accept by faith the grace of God (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38).¹

Habakkuk had received a revelation from God, who then told the prophet to publish the message. God assured Habakkuk that the promise would surely come to pass, even if its actualization seemed slow or uncertain. Those who believed the message, in spite of its delayed fulfillment, would live, or be saved by grace through faith, and those who rejected God’s promise would be damned. Here is the watershed for all humanity. One group (implicitly represented by Habakkuk and the oppressed Israelites) is described as bowing down in the humility of faith in God’s revealed truth. Regardless of the current evidence to the contrary, God will right the wrongs in Israel. This group (the just) will conduct their lives in the light of their belief in God’s faithfulness. The other group (implicitly represented either by the wicked and greedy among Israel, or by the Chaldeans, who were even more wicked and greedy than their Hebrew counterparts) is pictured as standing up in rigid unbending unbelief and rejection of God’s revealed truth. This group will conduct their lives in the light of their unbelief in God’s future action. The one group will be justified by their faith and the other will be condemned for their unbelief.

The New Testament writers quote Habakkuk 2:4a three times. Each time, the author stresses a different word from the phrase. In Romans 1:17, “the just shall live by faith,” Paul lays stress on the word “just.” The just one is the person who believes God’s word. In Hebrews 10:38, the idea is perseverance. The stress there is on the word “live.” The truly just person will believe, keep on believing, (liv-

¹ *New Scofield Reference Bible* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1967), 954, fnt. 3.

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What, Then, Was the Purpose of the Law?

John G. Reisinger

This is a slightly edited version of the third of four articles that we printed in 2000 on the New Perspective on Justification. The original title was “A Critique of the New Perspective on Justification,” and it appeared in Issue 89 of *Sound of Grace*. Because it is vital that we understand the meaning and purpose of the law, we are reprinting it here.

It is imperative to keep in mind that we have only one goal in this article. We want to answer the question that Paul asks in Galatians 3:19. The KJV says, “Wherefore then serveth the law?” The NIV states, “What, then, was the purpose of the law?” We must look carefully at how the Scriptures themselves, especially Paul’s writings, answer this all-important question. Any theology that wrongly answers the question concerning the original purpose of the law is unlikely to provide a correct view of Paul’s teaching on justification. If we misunderstand the purpose for which God gave the law in the first place, we can hardly understand its purpose and function today.

The text provokes at least three obvious questions:

1. To what was the law *added*?
2. Why did God add the law (to whatever it was to which it was added), or, what does *because of transgressions* mean?
3. Was it a permanent or a temporary addition, or, what does *until the seed should come to whom the promises are made* mean?

The typical response of classic Covenant Theology is that the phrase *it was added* means the law was an addendum to the Abrahamic covenant. That understanding would clearly contradict Galatians 3:15; “*Brothers,*

let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case.” Not only may a covenant not be set aside after two parties agree on its terms, but nothing at all can be added to or taken away from the terms of a cut covenant. To add the Mosaic covenant to the covenant God made with Abraham would be, in effect, to change the very nature of the Abrahamic covenant.

Classical Covenant Theology uses the *fence theory* to explain *because of transgressions*. This theory views the law as Israel’s protection (it would fence them in) from pagan idolatry and willful sin until Christ came. This was necessary to protect the gospel from pagan corruptions. If Covenant Theology is correct, and that indeed was the law’s purpose, then nothing has ever failed as badly as has the law. The ancient Hebrew people constantly fell into idolatry, and the generation that was alive when Christ came crucified him because *they* had corrupted the gospel into a religion of works.

Covenant Theology further insists that the word *law* in Galatians can mean anything you want it to mean as long as it does not mean, or include in its meaning, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, or so-called moral law, must be excised out of the term *law* and raised to a separate level; otherwise, you must admit that those ten commandments, as part of the larger law, were in force only until the seed should come. The law to which Paul refers in Galatians had a historical beginning at Sinai and a historical end at the coming of Christ.

I think any fair and honest interpre-

tation of Galatians 3:19, and of Paul’s entire theology of law, must include at least three points:

1. **The law, in some sense, was added to the revelation of God.** Sinai was not the beginning of law *per se*, but it was the beginning of written and codified law. Statements such as *before the law, the law entered, and until the law, sin was in the world*, do not mean that either sin or guilt began at Mount Sinai. Nor can we make those texts mean, “Well, the law really was there long before Sinai.” I repeat: the law, including the Ten Commandments as a summation of the terms of the Old Covenant, must have, in some sense, a historical beginning at Sinai and a historical end when Christ came.

Previously, God had given law orally or had written it in the consciences of his image-bearers. At Sinai, for the first time, God codified this law and put it into written form. He added the sabbath commandment to those other nine commandments, as the covenant sign, and the law became a covenant document written by the finger of God on tablets of stone—the Tables of the Covenant. God then expanded this covenant document into the Book of the Covenant. Later, the writers of Scripture used the phrase *Old Covenant* to refer to the entire Mosaic administration, including the ceremonial feasts.

Accordingly, we can say that the law, *as a covenant document*, was added to the revelation of God. This answers the first question raised by our text.

2. **The law was also added to the Israelite’s conscience.** Sin, which

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ing by faith), and will not give up. In our text, Galatians 3:11, the idea is the means by which a person becomes justified or gains life. No one will ever be made just or be converted by means other than faith. The stress is on “faith.” Paul uses the phrase to set forth three truths. (1) “Justified” people are those to whom God has given life through “grace through faith alone.” (2) Those who have faith are the truly *just*, or justified. (3) The truly just ones not only receive life through faith, they *continue to live by that faith* until the day their faith gives way to sight.

So what connection does Paul draw between the passage in Deuteronomy and the passage in Habakkuk? It is this: Habakkuk had been complaining that the law was paralyzed—it was ineffective. Wicked people within the covenant community flagrantly violated the law with impunity. They prospered, in spite of the threatened curses listed in Deuteronomy. Those who obeyed the law were not receiving its promised blessings. It looked, from the evidence at hand, as though God’s word was not to be believed. God assured Habakkuk that the law would indeed work—it would bring its threatened curses and its corrective justice, but the law itself was of no help in encouraging the Israelites to believe that God was faithful. In fact, it was a hindrance. For belief that pleased God, they needed faith. Paul’s point is that the righteous—the just—do not need the law to believe God. He has demonstrated that principle earlier by appealing to Abraham (verse 6); now he strengthens his argument by appealing to Habakkuk. The law promotes action based on immediate results—it operates on the principle of sight and works. Faith is concerned with belief in the face of no results.

We must grasp one major point

here: Paul is clear and emphatic in verses 11 and 12 about his doctrine of law and grace: *The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith.* The law cannot help a sinner become justified nor can the law help a justified sinner become sanctified. Both law and grace, and works and faith, operate on opposite principles. We need to cement in our minds: “The law is not of faith.” If you grasp that fact, then you will not look to the law to help save you or to keep you saved. Not only will you not hope for life by the law, you will not try to sustain that life through the law.

We should also mention Paul’s use of the word “continues” in Galatians 3:10. Although justification is a once-for-all declaration by God that can never change, it does not mean

The idea that a Christian is eternally secure regardless of how he or she lives is not the biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Perseverance until the end is vital to true salvation.

that a child of God must not persevere in faith until the end. The idea that a Christian is eternally secure regardless of how he or she lives is not the biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Perseverance until the end is vital to true salvation. The glory of the doctrine of perseverance is that God pledges his grace to every believer enabling that believer to persevere until the end. We must persevere and God’s grace will enable us to do so.

Verse 13 is an example of Paul answering an obvious objection without actually stating the problem. If the Jews were under the law, and therefore under its curse, as Paul has so clearly proven, then how can a Jew in such a condition ever be justified?

How can one who is justly condemned by the law ever escape that condemnation? That surely is a legitimate question and it would naturally enter the mind of anyone carefully following Paul’s logic.

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.

The answer to this question is that Christ has redeemed “us” from under the curse of the law. Christ’s atoning work completely satisfied every demand of the “just, holy, and good” law. That redemption by the blood of Christ brought those who had believed out from under the curse of the law.

The first thing to establish concerns to whom Paul refers when he says “us.” The apostle uses the pronoun “we” many ways. Sometimes, he means *we people*; sometimes, *we sinners*; sometimes, *we Jews*; sometimes, *we believers*, whether Jew or Gentile; sometimes, *we believing Jews*; sometimes, *we apostles*. Context must establish the correct uses.

John Brown states that nearly all commentators say that the referent of “us” in verse 13 is either “us elect sinners,” or “us believers.” He then proceeds to give what he feels is the correct meaning.

But to a person who is familiar with the modes of thinking and speaking of the primitive age, and who carefully attends to the context, it will appear plain that this is not the apostle’s meaning. It is obvious, that they who are “redeemed from the curse of the law,” are distinguished from “the Gentiles,” to whom the blessing of Abraham comes through means of their redemption. The direct subject of the discussion is the impossibility of being justified by obedience to the Mosaic law; and it is the curse of the Mosaic law that is spoken in 10th verse. The Gentiles believers

No One Has Ever Seen God.

Stan F. Vaninger

John 1:18 is a remarkable verse packed with meaning and significance. “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” The first part of the verse, “No one has ever seen God,” is an allusion to Exodus 33:20. Moses was on Mount Sinai and the Lord was speaking to him giving him some encouragement in his role as leader of the Israelites.

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence...But, he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

This is an accurate picture of the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant,

the Jews, like Moses on Mount Sinai that day, saw only the ‘backside’ of God. They saw God through types, shadows, prophecies, and promises.

Under the New Covenant, we see the face of God in the person of Christ. We see the spiritual realities behind the types and shadows of the Old Covenant. We see the fulfillment of many Old Covenant prophecies and promises. Often, the fulfillment goes far beyond what anyone living under the Old Covenant could have imagined.

In Old Covenant times, Moses was not allowed to see the glory of God. In the New Covenant era, we have the great privilege of seeing that glory in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Moses saw the backside of God; we see his face in Christ. This exact thought is found in Hebrews 1:3, *“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”*

John 1:14 takes on additional significance in light of the scene on Mount Sinai, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among

us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The remainder of John’s gospel recounts that glory seen by the first Christians as they heard the words of Christ, witnessed the many miracles he performed, and saw his love and compassion at work. Never did that glory shine brighter than during those three hours of darkness as he hung on the cross dying for our sins.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John puts us at the threshold of a new era in God’s plan of redemptive history. What was once denied Moses is now our privilege. Moses was told, *“no one may see me and live.”* We now look upon the face of God in Christ and in doing so, we not only live, but are given the precious gift of eternal life and enter into a knowledge of the one and only true God.

“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

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were, previously to their conversion, under sin and condemnation, as well as the Jewish believers; but not being subject to the Mosaic law, they could not be considered as exposed to *its* curse, and, of course, they could not be represented as redeemed from a curse to which they were never subject.

Every principle of rational interpretation, therefore, requires us to consider the statement made in this verse as referring to those Jews who had become Christians. They had been under that law which the Judaizing teachers were so eager to impose on the Gentile believers; but so far from being justified by that law, they incurred its curse, in consequence of their “not continuing in all things written in its book to do them,” and must have taken the tremendous consequences had not “Christ redeemed them from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for them.”²

Every Jew was exposed to the curse of the law of Moses, or the Old Covenant. His circumcision committed him to obey that law as covenant terms. The death of Christ redeemed the believing Jew from the curse of the broken law. Our Lord was born under that law for the express purpose of earning its righteousness and enduring its curse. He bore the curse of the law and delivered those described from its just condemnation. Notice the text does not say, “Christ *delivered* us,” even though that is true. Redemption is more than deliverance. To substitute “deliverance” for “redemption,” as the *Good News for Modern Men* paraphrase does, misses a key ingredient in redemption. Redemption requires the necessity of a redemption price which is acceptable to the one to whom it is paid. If I drug a jailor, steal his keys, and then turn all his prisoners free, I have “delivered” them but I certainly have not “redeemed” them.

We must remember that redemp-

² John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, (London: William Oliphant and Sons, 1853), 129.

tion from the curse of the law was not accomplished by an act of God’s power. Nor was that redemption accomplished by the love of God. Not all the love in the universe, including all the love in God’s heart, could forgive one single sin. Strict justice demands payment for sin, and nothing can pay for sin except the atoning blood of Christ. God will be satisfied with only one sacrificial offering—the once-for-all, blood-shedding sacrifice of his Son on the cross. The hymn writer was correct when he wrote, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”³

Paul then quotes another Scripture

Not all the love in the universe, including all the love in God’s heart, could forgive one single sin. Strict justice demands payment for sin, and nothing can pay for sin except the atoning blood of Christ.

reference (Deut. 21:23) to prove his point:

Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: (Gal 3:13 quoting Deut. 21:23)

In ancient Israel, after a person was put to death for committing a capital crime, his body was “hung on a tree” in a public place. The Israelites also hung the dead bodies of vanquished non-Israelite kings on trees (see Joshua 8:29; 10:16-29). This treatment was to show all who passed by that the person who had died was under the curse of God. Our Lord was not cursed because he died on a cross, he died on a cross to show *he was being cursed by God!* Dying the death of the cross was the proof that he was dying the death of an enemy of God. This

³ Robert Lowry, “Nothing but the Blood,” (1826-1899).

was the great stumbling block for the Jews. They would ask, “How can he be the messiah when he dies under the curse of God? How can the anointed one be God’s enemy?” They were correct that he died under God’s curse, as though he were God’s enemy, but they did not understand that he was bearing that curse vicariously. It is true that Christ died a true sinner’s death under the wrath of God, but he was no sinner. He had neither deserved nor earned that death. He was treated as if he were a guilty sinner only because he took our sins upon himself. He was treated as a sinner so that we might be treated as if we were without sin.

Verse 14 was never clear to me until I started to understand New Covenant Theology. I could not see the connection of the truth set forth in verse 14 to the truth in verse 13. I missed the connecting word “that.” Verse 14 is stating that the Jewish believer’s redemption from under the curse of the law was essential in order to make several things possible.

The first result of Christ redeeming the Jewish believer from the curse of the law was that it enabled the “blessing of Abraham,” which is justification, “to come on the Gentiles.” Why was the justification of the Gentiles not possible until the Jewish believer was redeemed from the curse of the law? What is the connection between those two things?

The second thing made possible by the Jewish believer’s redemption from the curse of the law was that “*we might receive the Spirit by faith.*”

That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:14)

Again we ask, what is the connection between the Jewish believer’s need for redemption from the curse

What Then?—Continued from page 3

had been in the world before Sinai, now took on the character of willful transgression of revealed, codified, covenant law. At Sinai, God imprisoned the Israelites' consciences under the terms and threats of the law as a covenant of life and death. That is the meaning of Paul's phrases in Galatians 3:22-24: "The Scripture has confined (or declared) all under sin," (v. 22). In verse 23, Paul writes, "We were kept under guard by the law," and "we were shut up to faith." Now the subject of the sentence is narrower: we, i.e., the Hebrew people. The means by which an Israelite identified sin also became more specific: through the law. Paul expresses the same idea in verse 24: "the law was our tutor." We can neither gloss over these expressions nor treat them as if they teach that these functions of the law existed prior to Sinai. There is a distinct period (some would call it a dispensation) that existed before the law, which Paul distinguishes from another period: after the law. The dividing point between the two is the "giving of the law." There is also a "before sin" and an "after sin" period of time separated by "sin entering into the world" (Rom. 5:13, 20). All persons were affected by sin entering the world, but only the nation of Israel felt the sting of sin explicitly as transgression of covenant law, and for them, this sting began at Sinai.

The phrase *because of transgressions* does not mean that God gave the law for the express purpose of curbing transgressions. Actually, Paul is saying that God's purpose was exactly the opposite. God designed the law specifically to magnify sin by clear definition and thus bring sin to the surface. The law did not cause a person to sin, or make him or her more sinful, but the law did provoke and thus expose the sin that was already present. The law certainly made those under it more accountable for their sin.

This concept would have been difficult for a Jewish person to accept. He or she would have found it hard to believe that God deliberately designed his holy law to be a *ministry of death*. An Israelite would not have understood how the law blessed a sinner by killing any and every hope the sinner had of achieving acceptance with God through works, birth, or ritual. The truth presented in our text and in Romans 5:20 and Romans 7:5-13 provides the correct understanding of the purpose and function of the holy law of God.

Let us consider the Romans 5 and 7 passages for further understanding of what Paul means by the phrase *the law was added because of transgressions*. The ASV has an explanatory note, "for the sake of defining." Remember, we are still seeking to answer the question, "What, then, was the purpose of the law?"

God designed the law specifically to magnify sin by clear definition and thus bring sin to the surface.

In Romans 7:5, Paul writes:

For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. (NIV, emphasis added)

The sinful nature is stronger than reason, conscience, and law all put together. Notice that Paul specifically states that the law actually *aroused* sinful passions. The law was the instrument that brought already existing sinful passions to the surface. It is indeed an amazing statement, but it is true: *the law is the greatest ally that sin has*. That is exactly what Paul

means in 1 Corinthians 15:56: "*The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.*" The law actually gives sin its awesome strength. The purpose for which God gave the law is stated clearly in this passage. If sin tempts you, and you seek help from the law, will the law help you, or will it help sin? It is an amazing thought, but Scripture is clear: the law will help sin, or rather, sin will use the law.

3. The specific tutorial function of the law that began at Sinai and ended with the coming of Christ, was peculiar to the nation of Israel and lasted only until the time when the Holy Spirit became the New Covenant paraclete, or "until the seed should come." This brings us to our third question: Was the law a permanent or a temporary addition? Again, we find that Paul addresses this aspect of the law in Romans chapter 7, this time in verse 6:

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

The phrase *written code* can only refer to the Ten Commandments as a covenant document of life and death. The phrase *written code* is deliberately set in contrast to the *new way of the Spirit*. This is the "written code that was against us [the Israelites]" and was taken away by the cross (Col. 2:14). The law, as covenant terms or written code, must not be allowed to terrorize a believer's conscience. The law can neither bless nor curse the believer. He or she is beyond the reach of the power of the law as judge, executioner, or benefactor. Galatians 5:6 and Romans 7:4 are key verses concerning our new service in Christ through grace.

Romans 7:4: *Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ;*

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of the law and his or her *receiving the Holy Spirit by faith?* (I highly recommend a careful reading of John Brown, pages 131-140 on these verses). As we look at these verses, we need to “gird up the loins of our minds.” John Brown lays out the problem.

But it may be asked, “What connection is there here? What has Christ’s enduring the Mosaic law in the room of his people who were subject to it [the Jews] to do with another class of persons altogether [the Gentiles] obtaining justification from the offences they had committed against God in doing what they knew to be wrong and neglecting to do what they knew to be right.”⁴

Understanding these verses and answering Brown’s questions requires a clear understanding and application of the following biblical facts.

Fact one: The nation of Israel “had the law” in *some clear sense* that the Gentiles did not.

Fact two: The nation of Israel, and every Jew in it, by virtue of his or her being “under the law,” was therefore also under the “curse of the law.”

Fact three: The Gentiles were not under the law, meaning the law of Moses or the Old Covenant, and therefore were not under the “curse of the law.” The “curse of the law” must, of necessity, follow the breaking of those of God’s revealed laws under which a person lives.

Fact four: This does not mean that Gentiles were not guilty sinners. It does mean their guilt was not measured by specific transgressions of a law that was never given to them. Romans 4:15 is greatly misunderstood. This text says, “*Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.*” (Romans 4:15). This text usually is misquoted, especially by Covenant Theologians, as saying, “*for where no law is, there is*

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Linda R

no sin.” They then proceed to misuse the verse to prove the necessity of all human beings, including Gentiles, as being under the law. The logic of this position is as follows: since there must be law before there can be sin, and we know all people are sinners, we know that all people must be under the law. Paul, however, is not saying that there must be law in order for there to be sin, that is—“no law, no sin.” He says that sin cannot be credited as **transgression of law** unless that law is known. The whole world, apart from Noah and his family, was judged as guilty sinners and died in the flood long before the law was ever given to Moses at Sinai. Nobody first became a sinner at Sinai, but the Jews became the first “transgressors of revealed and codified law” at Sinai.

Fact five: The primary purpose of the law of Moses, which was the Old Covenant, was to reveal sin and make those under it feel their guilt. The law did not cause sin, but it did bring to the surface the sin that was already in people’s hearts.

Fact six: The law covenant at Sinai not only separated sinners from God, it also separated Israel from all other nations. The law created, by God’s design, a wall of partition that not only segregated all who were under it from God, but also segregated Israel, as God’s chosen nation, from the Gentiles. The Jews were not allowed even to eat with Gentiles.

Fact seven: As long as that wall of partition was in force, there was no possibility of Gentiles being recon-

⁴ Brown, *Galatians*, 134.

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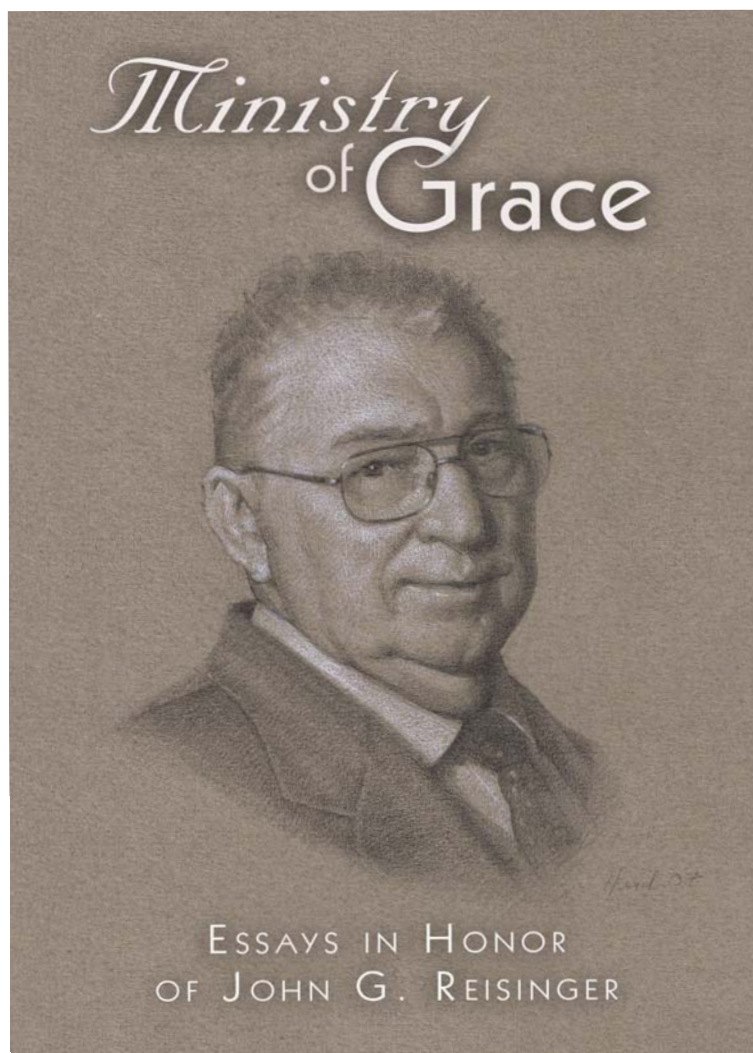
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With articles by John G. Reisinger



The contributors to this book have written in appreciation and recognition of the grace of God at work in the life and ministry of John G. Reisinger. Having been uniquely blessed by Pastor Reisinger's teaching, each contributor chose a biblical or doctrinal theme to expound upon that reflects one of the areas highlighted in John's ministry of grace. God's sovereignty, the new covenant, the doctrines of grace, worship, and the matchless saving work of Jesus Christ are all set forth in this book to the glory of God. In keeping with John's ministry, the essays were written to be substantial, but also readable for a wide audience. Two of Pastor John's popular sermons are included in this book as well. It is hoped and prayed that this book will lead many to marvel at the wonderful grace of God, and to praise the Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

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ciled with either God or with Jews unless they converted to Judaism. There could never be any kind of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles as long as the middle wall of partition was in place.

Fact eight: Gentiles were not under the curse of the law of Moses because they had never been given the law of Moses. The Gentiles, however, were still sinners under the wrath of God because there was, and is, a revelation of God in the heart of all people, as well as in creation, that leaves all people, whether they have been given the law of Moses or not, guilty and condemned before God (Romans 1).

Fact nine: Since it was the law as covenant that segregated the Jews and Gentiles, that segregated situation had to remain in place as long as the law of Moses, or the Old Covenant, was in force. The middle wall of partition had to be removed before the gospel of free justification could come to the Gentiles and they could be “fellow heirs” with the Jews. The distinction of “Jew and Gentile” the Old Covenant, mandated by God, must stand in force as long as the Old Covenant stood in force.

Fact ten: Nothing less than the atonement of Christ, establishing the New Covenant and the gift of the Holy Spirit to create the Body of Christ, could fulfill and do away with the Old Covenant.

When you put all of these things together, they explain Paul’s statement concerning the need for the Jew’s redemption from under the law and the gift of the Holy Spirit so that Gentiles could be saved. Nothing less than the cross could satisfy God and bring reconciliation between him and sinners. Likewise, nothing but the cross could destroy the enmity between Jews and Gentiles and reconcile them to each other (See Ephesians 2:10-21). You

can reconcile enemies but you cannot reconcile enmity. In order to reconcile enemies, you must remove the enmity that is the cause of their being enemies. This Christ did when he nailed the Old Covenant to the cross.

John Brown’s summary of this section is excellent. He shows how the “promise of the Spirit” was to be “one of the grand characteristics of the Messiah’s reign (See Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 36:27; Joel; John 14:16, 17; 15:26; 16:7).”

The sum, then, of what the apostle says in these two most important verses is this: “We believing Jews owe our salvation not to the law, but entirely to Christ, and obtain it entirely by believing. We, by violating the law, to which we were subject, had incurred its curse; but Christ has delivered us from this curse by enduring it in our room. As his sufferings and death are sufficient and intended to avail, not only as the propitiation for our sins, but also for those of the whole world; and as, by completely satisfying all the demands of the Mosaic law, they have put an honorable termination to that order of things, which, doing its continuance, necessarily excluded the great body of the Gentiles from the blessing of Abraham—an order of things which, now that the Messiah is come, has completely served its purpose,—the consequence is, that justification by believing is extended to men of every nation; and we Jews obtain the promised Spirit through believing the gospel, and not by obedience to the law.”⁵

Brown then adds a footnote saying: “It scarcely requires to be noticed, that it is through the channel of the atonement that the Spirit comes to the Gentiles as well as Jews.”

In our next study, we begin to get into the heart of New Covenant Theology. The section we will examine, which tends often to be misunderstood, explains the real purpose and function of the law of Moses. Ω

⁵ Ibid., 138, 139.

Hymn #49 in the Gadsby Hymnal (Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2000)

John Berridge (1716-1703)

The law demands a weighty debt,
And not a single mite will bate;
But gospel sings of Jesus’ blood,
And says it made the payment good.

The law provokes men oft to ill,
And churlish hearts makes harder still;
But gospel acts a kinder part,
And melts a most obdurate heart.

“Run, run, and work,” the law commands,
Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;
But sweeter news the gospel brings;
It bids me fly, and lends me wings.

[Such needful wings, O Lord, impart,
To brace my feet and brace my heart;
Good wings of faith and wings of love
Will make a cripple sprightly move.]

With these a lumpish soul may fly,
And soar aloft, and reach the sky;
Nor faint nor falter in the race,
But cheerily work, and sing of grace.

Submitted by:

John T. “Jack” Jeffery
Pastor,
Wayside Gospel Chapel
Greentown, PA

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that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

Galatians 5:6: *For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. (KJV)*

We must have all three of the things mentioned in this last text: We must have *faith*, but it must be a faith that *works*, and not a dead faith. However, it must be a faith whose works are motivated by *love* and not fear. Nothing on this list is optional in true salvation. We must have all three and they must be in the right order.

Summary

As we wrap up our answer to the question, “Why, then, the law?”, please consider one final passage. In Romans 7:1-13, Paul illustrates and explains an important truth about the law:

1. 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?

2. 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.

3. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

4. So, my brothers, 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.

Paul here sets forth the real problem with the law. Was the law perfectly holy? Yes! Was the law perfectly good? Yes! Was it a just law? Yes! Were its demands as a husband good, just, and fair? Yes? Then why did the believers to whom Paul was writing have to die to the law as a husband? Why did that relationship have to be nullified? What was wrong with the first husband—the law—that made it essential to be delivered from it as a husband? Look at Romans 7:4. The believers Paul addresses had to die to the law as the only means of legitimately severing their relationship to it, so they could be married to Christ, ‘*In order that we [they] might bear fruit to God!*’! The law could not

As long as the conscience is wedded to the law and motivated by its just, holy, and good demands, which no one can meet, it can never rest, because the conscience knows that its owner has failed to produce acceptable works of righteousness.

plant a seed in the heart of a believer that would provoke love and produce fruit acceptable to God. The law cannot produce holiness. It can only condemn, and that is exactly the job that God gave it to do. All that the law can provoke in any heart is sin and fear. The law is an impotent husband when it comes to furnishing a seed that can produce holy fruit unto God. As long as the conscience is wedded to the law and motivated by its just, holy, and good demands, which no one can meet, it can never rest, because the conscience knows that its owner has failed to produce acceptable works of righteousness. This is true even though the law is holy, just and good. *The seed of the gospel alone can produce the fruits of grace.*

Is that not exactly what verses 5 and 6 are saying?

5. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.

6. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

7. What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”

In verse 7, Paul asks, “Is it the law’s fault that I cannot be holy?” He recognizes that it is a nonsensical question, and his own answer is a resounding no! Is the law sinful or in any way to blame for any person’s sin? No! The problem with the law arises when anyone tries to use the law to perform a function that God never intended it to perform. This is the very point Paul makes in chapter four of Galatians with the allegory of Sarah and Hagar. Hagar was a wonderful handmaid, but was never meant to bear Abraham’s children. Likewise, the law was a wonderful handmaid of the gospel, but was never meant to produce holiness in either a sinner or a saint. When Paul says that Hagar is a symbol of the law covenant given at Sinai, his point is that the

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makes no difference at all.

We can easily see the ramifications of this problem in everyday matters. The consequences of what we call something are even more deadly in theological matters. If we were to follow Shakespeare's beautiful notion and apply it to theology, then God by any other name would still be God. That is a concept we can explore another time. Our text today addresses the converse—when we keep God's name, but change his essence. We call him God, but we alter who he fundamentally is. What we have in such a case is one of the many varieties of idolatry. And idolatry is inherently worldly.

Worldliness is multifaceted. We have seen six facets already in this series. Repeatedly, we have asserted that worldliness is not a mere act or even a set of actions; rather, it is wrapped up in the inner attitudes of the heart and mind, and it covers a lot of territory. Worldliness's seventh face is no less surprising than are some of the others we have already investigated. But of all the subtleties of worldliness we have explored thus far, this new characteristic is king. In fact, it may well be primary over all those we have yet to explore. The psalmist outlines it in verses 19 and 20. On the surface, many of us would immediately imagine ourselves free from it, but in fact, we are profoundly susceptible to it.

They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.²

It is plain that this incident is nothing less than idolatry. Idolatry, however, is not always

straightforward. It has an intriguing nature. Intriguing and informative. Idolatry creeps into our lives in divergent ways. The subjects in our text practiced idolatry, but they did not do so by attempting to throw off God or religion. They had no intention of becoming pagans. We must not miss the subtlety here. Exodus 32 records the entire event for us.

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.³

We cannot deny Israel's idolatry as evidenced by this incident. And we congratulate ourselves that we're not idol makers like that! Or are we? In reality, the Israelites were only doing what many of us often want to do. In the absence of Moses' presence, in the shadow of Sinai with its frightening clouds, thunders, and voices, they did exactly what we try to do in all sorts

of ways: they did their best to make God, their God, more tangible, and thus, more governable.

Let me ask, have you ever tried to do that? Have you tried to manage God by using prayer to twist his arm? Ever made deals with him? Ever promised to quit certain "small" sins or agree to do extra Bible reading, church going, prayer time, or good works in exchange for some desired outcome? That is idolatry. It is every bit as much idolatry as is fashioning a golden calf. The heart of this problem in this account, and in our own experience, is not so much *what* as *why*.

Once they made the calf, they named it. Do you know what they named it? Look again at verses 4 and 5: "These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.'"

The word LORD in verse 5 is Jehovah! Catch this. This is vital to see. They did not change gods. They did not adopt an Egyptian god. They just wanted to make the god who had brought them up out of Egypt a bit more tangible. A god they could carry about at will. A god they could touch and see. A god who was neither transcendent nor unmanageable. A god who intimidated them less. Worldliness always seeks to reduce God to a more comfortable image, physically or otherwise. We want to defang him—to make him finite and fully comprehensible. On some level, we make a god of our own liking, but in reality, this god is no god at all.

Idolatry is a bit like Heinz products; it comes in fifty-seven varieties. However, its three most basic forms are easily discernible.

First, there is PURE idolatry: This is the idolatry of the pagan who worships other gods—period. It

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Psalm 106:19-20.

³ Exodus 32:1-6.

consists in the first place in making literal images as the Israelites did. However, it differs in that it does not grow out of the soil of true religion as Israel's idolatry did. Pure idolatry does not start with the true God of the Bible and pervert him. It begins with an imagined form of god and creates him afresh. This was the idolatry of Israel's enemies—the pagan nations that surrounded her. It is the kind of idolatry that gave birth to the likes of Molech, Ashtaroth, and the Baals.

Pure idolatry also consists of a second, less obvious form. Its most common name is atheism. In truth, all atheism devolves to worship of self—of human intellect and ability. In some cases, it spills over into a form of pantheism—seeing the impersonal physical universe as “all there ever was, is, and ever will be”—as the scientist Carl Sagan used to say at the beginning of every episode of his *Cosmos* television series. This too is a form of idolatry. The hubris is staggering. In order to know that there is no God, a person has to have access to all the information that exists now and all that ever will exist in the future. Atheism is a virtual declaration of self-omniscience. Alas, it is the fool who has said in his or her heart, “there is no God” (Ps. 14:1).

The second basic form of idolatry is MIXED idolatry. This is the idolatry of the “religious.” This too, comes in several forms. It appears when people simply try to add Christ or the God of the Bible to their existing pantheon. It most often shows itself in evangelism, through statements such as, “You don't have to give up your other gods; you just need to accept Jesus TOO!” This was a common practice among the Roman Catholics who evangelized Central and South America. This kind of evangelism produced some of the strange syncretism in the Christianity often practiced today in those regions. It fosters superstitious notions of how people relate to God and to truth.

Its corollary appears in popular American Christianity in the prevailing “Health and Wealth” movement. Its paradigm, conscious or unconscious, is this: “I already serve greed or covetousness or self-aggrandizement, so I will add devotion to Christ so that I can accomplish the accumulation of money and goods. Thanks to him, I can be truly happy with them.”

Then there is the act of adding other things TO Christ. This happens when we co-mingle, dilute, and/or redefine God to suit our ends. The subjects of our text demonstrated this kind of idolatry. We read of them in verse 4 of Genesis 32: “These are your ‘gods’—ELOHIM as the Hebrew has it—says Aaron. And so we will make a feast to the LORD—JEHOVAH.”

Oh how dangerous this is. As we have already mentioned above, its subtlety makes it so dangerous. This kind of idolatry does not abandon the God of the Bible. It even retains his revealed covenant name. But it refashions him. It reduces him to a more acceptable level, no longer transcendent or imposing. He is little. Sparkling to the eye. Representative of value even in the world's eyes. He can be carried about, set up and related to at will. He makes no demands. We tell him when he can come out, be observed, and be worshiped. We can put him away when we please. In fact, we can put him anywhere we like. We have him firmly in our grasp. He is our God all right. Truly ours. He is not his own.

Three factors inevitably lead us down this path. We touched on them in previous articles, but we will review them here. Remember too, that worldliness is pervasive in the soul, and is not located in mere acts.

Impatience will drive us there first. Remember? The Israelites were unwilling to wait for God's time to lead them further, so they

took the gifts God had given them by plundering Egypt, and sought to speed up the process to something more agreeable to their natural lusts. In the same way, we can cast a god for ourselves who is as impatient for what we want as we are. And if we see God that way, we can justify all manner of aberrant behavior. The god that goes before me is a god who does not want me to wait for anything. That being the case, I have his smile when I pursue any course I choose. If ministry is what I want, I do not need to wait; I can just cook it up and do it. I do not want to wait for sanctifying grace to enable me to grow into Christ's image, so I construct a god who encourages me in my impatience. He assures me that I am owed all of the inheritance NOW—“MY GOD” wants me to have all that Heaven promises NOW.

I fashion a god in my mind who promotes a life of no difficulty, no heartache, no sickness, no death, no disappointments; in short—no toleration of anything that might get in the way of getting all I am supposed to have. A god of no death to self either. A god who demands no cross.

Have you fashioned a god like that? This god allows you to demonize all of your enemies; i.e., anyone or anything that threatens your prospect of getting everything thing you want NOW. Impatience leads us to reshape God so that we might have his blessing as we pursue what we ‘deserve.’

Never is this more evident than when we are asked to forgo some current pleasure for the sake of attending to Christ, his people, and his kingdom. This newly-fashioned god knows that I should never have to actually sacrifice my television time, my recreation time, or my time with family to study, pray, or seek his face to worship. In fact, he encourages

What Then?—Continued from page 13

law was never intended to beget, or be the mother of, holiness. Hagar, the law, had to be cast out, along with the child, Ishmael, she had produced. In our passage from Romans, Paul continues to link the strength of sin to the law:

8. But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.

This is the same principle that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 15:56, which we considered earlier. Sin uses the law against anyone who is under the law. The law actually produces the fruit of sin, because our natures are willing slaves of sin. Apart from the law, sin is present, but it is as though it were asleep, compared to the power it gains from the law. The law makes it spring to life.

9. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.

No person who lived under the law became a sinner because of the law, nor did anyone become more sinful because of the power the law gave to sin. All that the law did was to help prove what was true all along, namely, that people are depraved sinners. *That was exactly its God ordained purpose.* Apart from the law coming in power, what Israelite would have believed that he or she was so wicked?

10. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

The law covenant promised life for all those who obeyed. However, the more sincerely one attempts to keep the law, the more acutely one feels the power of death. The words, “intended to bring life” does not mean that God hoped that some sinners in Israel would be able to obey the law and earn its promised blessings. The phrase means that there are two ways of life set forth in the Old Testament Scriptures. (1) Obey the covenant and live, or, (2) believe the promise made to Abraham and live. Paul is saying, “I have news for you. If you try the first way, you will never make it. But then, that’s exactly why God set the law in place.”

11. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

12. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good

13. Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (NIV)

Again, in verses 11 and 12, Paul

shows the awful power of sin to use the law as an ally. When misused, the holy, righteous, and good law of God is a great hindrance to biblical sanctification. I urge a reading of the introduction to Lloyd-Jones’ book on the seventh chapter of Romans where he deals with this truth. I find it difficult to understand how anyone can read Romans 7:13 and then say, “God gave his holy law to a redeemed people so they could show their love by obeying it.” I find it even more difficult to understand how the New Perspective on Justification can say, “The law never demanded anything even close to sinless perfection.”

Romans 5:20 - *The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more ...*

Conclusion

Neither individual laws nor the guilt of sin came into being for the first time at Sinai. God judged and drowned the entire world, apart from Noah and his family, because of the sin of humanity at that time. Genesis 6:5 recounts the story: “*The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*” Remember, this took place long before God gave the law at Sinai. The people who lived before the law was given at Sinai were just as wicked in their hearts and in their lives as those living under

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the law after Sinai. The law had nothing to do with making human beings more depraved.

At Sinai, sin took on the nature of actual and deliberate transgression of a known commandment. Consider Romans 4:15, "... *because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.*" It does not say, "where there is no *law* there is no sin." There was sin before Sinai, but God did not reckon it as a breach of covenant law. God did not reckon sin as

that we have clearly defined out-of-bounds, we can know for sure whether we are within or outside those lines.

Those boundary lines not only will tell what is truly in and out of bounds, they also will reveal how honest we are and whether we want to win at any cost. Our attitude to the lines reveals our heart. The presence of the lines will sometimes bring another person out of us. It is amazing how some people simply cannot stand to lose and thus will lie and cheat. Once the

pose of the law. If we miss the concept of the relationship between sin and the law, we run the risk of making the law to be an instrument of sanctification, contrary to Paul's statements in Galatians 3:3-5. Paul recognizes that his presentation of the law's purpose and effect lays him open to the charge of anti-nomianism. If our perception of the law does not leave us open to the same charge, is it possible that we are not grasping the subject in the way Paul intended us to? Is there any way that the New Perspective's view of the law could result in an accusation of anti-nomianism? Not only is the New Perspective's view on justification contrary to Luther and both historic and contemporary Reformed theology, as we demonstrated in our earlier articles, it is contrary to the Apostle Paul himself. Ω

If we miss the concept of the relationship between sin and the law, we run the risk of making the law to be an instrument of sanctification, contrary to Paul's statements in Galatians 3:3-5.

transgression of law simply because he had not yet given the law.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Suppose we were playing volleyball without first laying down any boundary lines. We wave our hands and say, "Out of bounds is about there someplace," with nothing to mark it. Imagine the arguments over whether a given shot was or was not out of bounds. Suppose we put down rocks or handkerchiefs at the four corners of the court. That would help some, but not very much. Finally, we put down either a string or a white chalk line. Now we have set the boundaries. Now

lines are marked, then ignorance can no longer be a mitigating factor in any sense. In and out of bounds are clearly delineated, thus bringing some lies clearly to the surface.

At Sinai, God laid down clear boundary lines and made obedience to those lines the basis of his covenant relationship with the nation of Israel. After Sinai, the nation of Israel not only sinned against conscience and the law written in the heart, they deliberately sinned against clearly known written covenant laws.

Our theology of law must take into account Paul's teaching on the pur-

The law demands what it cannot give; grace gives all it demands.

Blaise Pascal

Sow a thought - you reap a deed

Sow a deed - you reap a habit

Sow a habit - you reap a character

Sow a character - you reap a destiny

Submitted by Bonnie Reisinger

Worldliness—Continued from page 15

me to put him—the hallowing of his name, the advancement of his kingdom, and the doing of his will on earth as it is in heaven—on hold until I have done all I want!

The second factor that leads to idolatry is the need for tangibility. We want a SEEN god. A god we can touch and handle. Such a god requires no real faith. We want a god of definable limits who has needs just as we do. We can relate to a god who has to eat, even if the god is a calf who eats grass (See: Ps. 106:20). We are comfortable with a god we can see and touch—a god who is quantifiable.

The worldly heart cries, “Bring God down to my level.” We are uncomfortable with his transcendence because he might do unpredictable things, or things we don’t like, without asking our permission. Make him more like me so I can **manage** him. Here is a god, who for the right price, demands nothing and gives everything. Tangibility equals manageability in our minds. One cannot help but be reminded of Wilbur Rees’ penetrating poem:

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God please,

I would like to buy just a little of the Lord.

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,

Not enough to take control of my life; I’ll keep

Just enough to equal a cup of warm milk

Just enough to ease some of the pain from my guilt.

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please;

I would like to find a love that’s pocket-sized.

Not enough to make me love a black man.

Not enough to change my heart; I can only stand

Just enough to take to church when

I have the time,

Just enough to equal a snooze in the sunshine.

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

I want the warmth of the womb/ But not a new birth.

I would like to purchase a pound of the eternal

In a paper sack guaranteed or money back.

You see, I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please;

I would like to hide some for a rainy day,

Not enough to make people see a change in me,

Not enough to impose responsibility;

Just enough to make church folks think I’m O.K.,

Just enough to exhibit once a week on Sunday.

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.⁴

The third issue on the road to idolatry is license. Someone has said that there is nothing we will not sacrifice to the god of self-will. How true! We want a God whom we can serve only on Sunday so that we are free to do whatever we want the rest of the time. The prophet Jeremiah captured this idea perfectly, and exposed its futility.

“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?”⁵

Beloved, the God who saves us, saves us FROM our sin, not IN IT. An idolatrous mindset is diametrically

4 Wilbur Rees, Citation: Leadership 4.1. Accessed through <http://www.sermoncentral.com/newsletter/031103.html>

5 Jeremiah 7:8-10.

opposed to the Christianity of the Bible. This form of worldliness thinks that as long as I do my sacred duty to this god I have made, then he will leave me alone to pursue whatever feels good to me. We rack up enough good points to keep the deity off our backs, and then we can live as we want. This deity is small, easily appeased, and incredibly selfish. As long as he gets his allotted amount of attention, he does not care about our moral or ethical development. He has no interest in what is best for us. How often have we created this kind of petty god who allows us to rationalize our sin by weighing it against our performance?

“I read my Bible for ten minutes today, so now I can curse my neighbor out. I prayed for ten minutes today, so it really doesn’t matter if I beat my wife occasionally. I went to church on Sunday—so what’s the big deal with cheating on my taxes, stealing from my employer, or stepping out with a boyfriend behind my husband’s back? I’ve got it covered.”

This is what idolatry looks like. We dress it in church language, and we practice it by being pew-sitting, hymn-singing, tithe-paying, doctrine-defining idolaters. When we remove all the religious trappings, however, we find naked idolatry.

Let me ask, are you making your own idol in one or more of these ways? Have you exchanged the glory of the living God for the god of your impatience? For the tangible/ manageable god of your comfort zone? Or the licentious god of your desires? Which god is yours today? The true and loving God or your idol?

We may deck our idolatry in Elizabethan English, Reformation formulations, or orthodox sentiments, but if we have re-cast the God of the Bible to suit our desires, we are as worldly as worldliness gets.

The words of God through

Jeremiah, in the second chapter of the book that bears his name, serve as a good closing warning and reminder:

*“As a thief is shamed when caught,
so the house of Israel shall be shamed:
they, their kings, their officials,
their priests, and their prophets,
who say to a tree, ‘You are my father,
and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth.
For they have turned their back to me,
and not their face.
But in the time of their trouble they say,
‘Arise and save us!’
But where are your gods
that you made for yourself?
Let them arise, if they can save you,
in your time of trouble;
for as many as your cities
are your gods, O Judah.”⁶*

Such a god will be of no avail in the time of trouble. What good does it do us to create and love a god who suits our own sinful and selfish needs when the only God who loves us unconditionally and knows exactly what we really need is the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ?

Oh precious Heavenly Father, spare us from our need to re-make you into something you are not. For salvation is only in the Lord—not the Lord of our making, but the LORD who is LORD indeed. Ω

The Scars of the Saints!

Thomas Watson
“A Treatise Concerning Meditation”

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 1 Corinthians 1:26

Meditate on the sovereignty of Christ’s love! In the old law, God passed by the noble lion and the eagle—and took the dove for sacrifice. That God should pass by so many of noble birth and abilities, and that the lot of free grace should fall upon me—O the depth of divine grace!

How invincible is the love of Christ! “It is strong as death!” Song 8:6. Death might take away Christ’s life—but not His love! Neither can our sin wholly quench that divine flame of love; the church had her infirmities, her sleepy fits, Song 5:2, but though blacked and sullied, yet she is still Christ’s dove; Christ could see the faith, and wink at the failing.

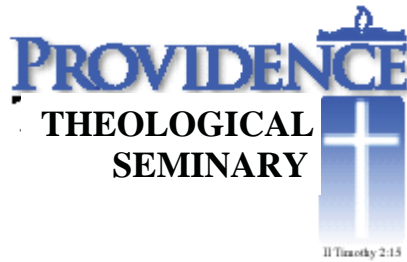
He, who painted Alexander, drew him with his finger over the scar on his face. Just so, Christ puts the finger of mercy over the scars of the saints! He will not throw away His pearls for every speck of dirt! That which makes this love of Christ the more stupendous—is that there was nothing in us to excite or draw forth His love! He did not love us because we were worthy—but by loving us He made us worthy!

Serious meditation on the love of Christ would make us love Him in return. Who can tread by meditation upon these hot coals of Christ’s love—and his heart not burn in love to Him?

Meditation on Christ’s love, would set our eyes abroad with tears! O that we should sin against so sweet a Savior! Had we none to abuse—but our best Friend? Must we give Him more gall and vinegar to drink? O, if anything can dissolve the heart into mourning—it is the unkindnesses we give to Christ! When Peter thought of Christ’s love to him—this made his eyes to water! “Peter went out and wept bitterly.”

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⁶ Jeremiah 2:26-28.



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