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LAW

Background

The word 'law' makes us think of legislation and law courts, but the Hebrew word *torah* actually means 'teaching' or 'instruction'. The moment Adam and Eve fell into sin they were estranged from the righteous God and needed instruction about how they could now approach the Lord without being consumed in the fire of his holy wrath. No matter how hard people tried to live God-pleasing lives, as fallen creatures they fell into sin. As sinners, they needed a way of forgiveness and of reconciliation with God, and that was always on the basis of blood sacrifice – pointing forward to Calvary. It is clear from Genesis 4:3–7 that Abel was bringing his sacrifice in response to divine instruction (it involved the shedding of the blood of the firstborn of the flock and the burning of fat portions), whereas Cain ignored those instructions and brought an inevitably unacceptable offering of the fruit of the ground (which represented his own supposedly 'meritorious' works). This is how things remained until the Exodus.

At Sinai

Following on from the marvellous deliverance of the people of Israel through the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, the saved Israelites needed instruction in how to live righteous lives as God's covenant people. The Law (known as 'the Law of Moses') was not given as the means of salvation but as the response to it – just as Abraham had first been saved by faith (he 'believed the Lord'; Genesis 15:5–6) and was called to live a holy life in a covenant relationship with God (Genesis 17:1–14).

The Ten Commandments begin with a reminder of salvation and covenant grace before they give a succinct summary of what it means to live in a God-pleasing and God-honouring way (see Exodus 20:1–17). In Exodus to Deuteronomy the Law was spelled out in great detail, as was the sacrificial system which would deal with the guilt incurred by not keeping the Law. Indeed, the Law could not make God's people perfect: it functioned not only as the goal of righteousness but also as the straight edge to reveal that: 'all have sinned and fall' [lit. 'go on falling'] 'short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). Paul calls it the *paidagogos* – the 'instructor/guide/guardian/trainer' of boys whose task it was to educate them to virtuous maturity. The Law was intended to lead people to Christ as Saviour (Galatians 3:24–27). Sadly, the Jews did not see true righteousness as the fruit of faith but sought to earn merit under the Law, only to fail (see Romans 9:31–32).

Exodus 20:1–26; 24:12; 31:18; Deuteronomy 6:6–9; Psalm 1:1–2; 19:7–11; 37:27–31; 40:8–10; 119:1–8; John 7:19; Romans 10:1ff; Galatians 3:11–29.

Law can never make people righteous before God. It can show us what is good, but it cannot enable us to do it. It is about external duty, not an inner power. It brings condemnation, not peace with God. Our only hope of righteousness is to be changed on the inside (regeneration and conversion, and then continuing in faith, obedience and perseverance). Grace makes all this possible.

Isaiah 1:13–18; 5:24; Jeremiah 9:13–16; Ezekiel 22:26; Daniel 9:8–13; Matthew 22:36–40; Luke 1:6; Acts 13:39; 15:5, 10–11; Romans 2:12–14; 3:20; 4:15; 5:13–14; 8:3–4; Galatians 3:21; Philippians 3:4, 6; Hebrews 7:19; James 2:10.

Good news! Jesus Christ, God the Son incarnate, Son of Man, lived a sinless life and fulfilled all righteousness as our representative (the second and last Adam, the head of redeemed humanity). Having atoned for our sins through his substitutionary sacrifice on the Cross, the risen and glorified Christ imputes and imparts his own righteousness to those who repent, are baptised and go on believing and trusting in him for salvation. Moreover, he comes to dwell in us through the Holy Spirit and so enables us to live holy lives. Interestingly, the Greek word for 'law' (like the English word) means both 'statute' and 'principle' (like the 'law' of gravity) – outer duty and inner dynamic. The 'law of Christ' is seen in righteous living in a believer (see Galatians 6:2) which reflects something of the goodness which we see perfectly in Jesus himself. In the New Testament, believers are called 'saints' (God's holy ones who are set apart to live to his glory). We are saved by grace through faith, and we live by grace as the Holy Spirit aids us in our walk of obedience to Jesus.

Matthew 5:17; John 1:17; Acts 9:13 (and often afterwards); Acts 15:11; Romans 7:7–8:11; 13:8–10; Ephesians 2:4–10; Philippians 2:12–13.

The grace of God revealed in the gospel is not to be an excuse for careless living. Indeed, if we turn back from the gospel, we are apostates and come under God's righteous curse.

Acts 15:1–2, 5, 19–20; Romans 6:1–14; Galatians 3:10; 5:3–6; Hebrews 6:4–6.