The New Covenant: Does it Abolish God's Law?

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Introduction

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Hebrews 10:16, New Revised Standard Version).

Does the New Covenant negate God's law and do away with any need to obey the Ten Commandments and other laws of God?

The belief that it does has long been a popular teaching in traditional Christianity. We'll thoroughly examine this question in this booklet.

Even more important, we'll address the real purpose of God's biblical covenants—more than one—and their vital role in the Creator's overall plan for mankind. It's highly important that we understand their true meaning.

How many people even know that the structure of the Bible is organized around a series of divine covenants—what we might call contracts or agreements—that reveal and describe the relationship God would like to have with every human being?

These covenants reveal God's promises. They also define the conditions that every person must meet to receive the blessings of those promises. God's covenants are the foundation of His divine plan to properly shape the way all people should think and behave.

God has a specific goal in mind. The final result of His plan is a divine family of sons and daughters who have developed the same righteous character that was evident in Jesus Christ when He was with mankind as a human being.

That character can be created only through an interactive process that takes place between each individual and God. It is a very personal process.

Why freedom of choice?

To make it possible for us to build that divine, holy and righteous character, God gives us freedom of choice. By giving us the liberty to make choices, He allows us to learn by our own experiences that we, with our limited abilities, cannot foresee all of the hurtful consequences that wrong choices produce. Only by relying on God's guidance will we learn how to avoid making bad choices.

Making wrong choices began with our very first human parents, Adam and Eve. They had to choose between two critical options.

They could allow God to fully guide their thinking and their way of life, or they could experiment and try to discern the best way to live by their own experiences.

They chose to learn by personal experience instead of fully putting their trust in God's

instruction, guidance and help. All of mankind has followed that same path, reaping the same sad results.

God's covenants reveal His plan to reverse that dangerous pattern of harmful choices. In these covenants, He promises His divine help and blessing to those who turn to Him with their whole heart for the guidance and help they need.

Some of the blessings He gives for accepting His guidance and help are spiritual, offering us eternal benefits. Others are physical, designed to bless us in this temporary, physical life.

Why was the promise of a new heart so necessary?

God's latest and most important covenant revealed in the Bible is centered on His promise—His unwavering commitment—to create a new heart in those who unconditionally turn to Him for help.

Why is divine intervention essential in receiving that change of heart? It's really very simple. We were created incomplete!

God indeed made human beings with an amazing ability to think creatively—with an intellectual capability that far exceeds the creativity of any other physical creature. The unique talent He has given to us to design and produce what we imagine is patterned after His own astounding creative capacity (Genesis 1:27).

But there remains a missing dimension in our thinking, a dimension that needs to be added so we can properly control our thoughts and the actions they produce. The Bible reveals that God is committed to creating in us that additional ability.

He promises to give us the knowledge, understanding and the power to rightly manage how we think, feel and behave—if we choose, willingly and sincerely, to give Him our full cooperation. We desperately need that added ability! The sad record of human history shows that we cannot consistently make right choices or maintain right attitudes without God's divine help.

Instead, each of us naturally weaves his own web of thoughts and patterns of behavior into a conflicting mixture of good and evil. Not everything we think and do is wrong. But neither is it always right. Like Adam and Eve, we reap the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Whether our life will be only physical and temporary or will last forever depends on whether we allow our Creator to actively change our hearts and minds.

As He told the people of ancient Israel: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20, emphasis added throughout).

From the beginning God has wanted all human beings to walk the path that leads to eternal life. Yet only one person has ever heeded His voice completely and walked that path perfectly—Jesus Christ!

All the rest of us have fallen short (Romans 3:23).

At His crucifixion, Jesus, through His death, implemented the New Covenant. This is why, on the evening before He was crucified, Jesus "took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is [figuratively speaking] the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you'" (Luke 22 :20).

In that new covenant God gathers together all of the carefully planned details of His plan of salvation. To benefit from that wonderful plan, it is essential that we correctly understand the meaning and purpose of the New Covenant that Christ implemented. Far too many people still misapply or distort what the Bible actually says about that New Covenant. Let's now unravel those distortions.

God's Magnificent Series of Covenants

"I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jeremiah 24:7, New International Version).

What is the central message of Jesus Christ's gospel? It is the promise that God plans to transform all people to be like Him, starting with their hearts and minds. Proclamation of that message continues through the Church He built (Matthew 16:18). But the full impact of that message will not be felt by all people until after He returns.

Eventually, as a result of His direct supervision, the whole "earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). Christ's first coming was only the beginning of His personal involvement in transforming the spiritual nature of mankind.

God's visionary plan

Through special covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, God long ago began to reveal important details of His plan to produce for Himself an enduring holy people (Leviticus 20:26; 26:12; Hebrews 8:10). The promised New Covenant—the basis of Christ's gospel—is the capstone of that revelation process.

Through the pen of the prophet Jeremiah, God summarized what He intends to accomplish through Jesus Christ: "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me" (Jeremiah 32:40).

The impact of that promise was only hinted at—through symbolic ceremonies—at the time ancient Israel became a nation under the Sinai Covenant. For example, the temple worship of ancient Israel anticipated Christ's sacrifice with figurative rituals and ceremonies.

Those rituals symbolized—for those living in that era—that a lasting, permanent solution to the problem of humanity's spiritual inadequacies was needed. But the sacrifices and rituals given to Israel at that time did not provide that solution.

The reason was that "the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper" (Hebrews 9:9, NIV). Only by forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Christ and receiving the spiritual power provided by the gift of the Holy Spirit is that possible.

Righteous laws, but no righteous heart

Since most of the people of ancient Israel did not receive God's Spirit, they were unable to live or apply God's teachings from the heart as a truly holy people. As Moses told them, "The Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear" (Deuteronomy 29:4).

But God already had a clear plan in mind to give them that "new heart" in the future. Even when speaking to Moses, God expressed His eager longing for the time when that change of heart could happen. He exclaimed to Moses, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29).

But the time was not yet right for God to make His Spirit available to the masses of humanity—not even to most of the people of Israel. Except for Israel's prophets and a few other specially chosen servants of God, Israel's history describes a people who had righteous laws but lacked righteous hearts.

Like most people today, they did not have the ability to live by the full spiritual intent of the instructions God reveals in the Scriptures. Something was missing.

Therefore, "God found fault with the people [notice that the fault was not with the laws He gave them] and said: 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new[revised] covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to My covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people'" (Hebrews 8:8-10, NIV).

A changed heart offered to mankind

Most people assume that the New Covenant abolishes the laws of God as enumerated under the Sinai Covenant (also known as the Old Covenant). But notice that no indication is given in this promise that God's laws are to be ignored or abolished.

On the contrary, they are to be engraved into the minds and hearts of the recipients of the promised New Covenant—to be made a part of their very being! This New Covenant is a vital revision in how God interacts with His people.

God has fully committed Himself to changing the hearts of all people who choose to serve Him willingly. Since "there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11), He has extended this promise to all nations.

As Paul explained, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'" (Galatians 3:8).

From the beginning, God's plan has been that all peoples are to receive an opportunity to repent—to turn from doing things their own way to wholeheartedly embracing God's way—and have their hearts changed so they can live as He intended. He decided to begin with one family —faithful Abraham and his descendants through his grandson Jacob.

God changed Jacob's name to Israel. From his 12 sons came the tribes of the ancient nation of Israel. To these physical descendants of Jacob, God began to reveal the essential details of His

plan to make a holy people for Himself.

What is a covenant?

Inherent in any covenant is the concept of a lasting commitment to a clearly defined relationship. Generally speaking, a covenant is a long-term agreement between two or more parties that formalizes a binding relationship between them. It defines their essential obligations and commitments to each other.

In ancient times, major covenants were ratified and kept alive through symbolic rituals that reflected each party's commitment to, and acceptance of, the covenant's binding requirements. However, covenant rituals are not the same as covenant commitments and obligations.

Rituals in divine covenants serve primarily as symbolic reminders and are intentionally given only a figurative value. The real value is in the substance of the commitments made! Through the substance of His covenants—His divine commitments—God binds Himself to perform all of the promises He makes.

In a divine covenant, God defines the basic obligations that He imposes on Himself and, usually, on the other participants. Thus a dominant feature of a covenant is a list of blessings that God promises to give to those who honor their covenant commitments.

A divine covenant can be compared to a sacred constitution established to regulate human relationships with God. It is a formal declaration of God's will and purpose. It typically expresses His deep love for humanity and reveals one or more major aspects of His plan for humanity's salvation.

Covenant discussions in the New Testament

Two covenants, the Sinai or Old Covenant and the New Covenant (mediated by Jesus Christ), are the focus of considerable discussion in the New Testament. Both are based on God's earlier covenant with Abraham that promises the inheritance of a global kingdom to Abraham's special "seed" or descendant—Jesus Christ (Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:16).

The covenant made at Mount Sinai established the ancient national kingdom of Israel. The New Covenant promises that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, will establish the much more inclusive Kingdom of God that will rule over the whole earth (Isaiah 9:7; Matthew 25:34; Luke 22:29-30; Revelation 11:15).

Jesus made that coming Kingdom, and the repentance required for us to participate in it, the central feature of His gospel (Mark 1:14-15). To qualify as an heir of that Kingdom, one has to meet the terms defined in God's covenants. Jesus Christ alone has met all of those terms perfectly.

So He alone is the qualified heir of all the promises made to Abraham. And only through Him may other human beings—including such men of faith as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Hebrews 11)—share in that promised inheritance. As Paul explained, "If you belong to Christ,

then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29, NIV).

Peter confirmed this central role of Jesus, saying, "There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, Revised English Bible).

This is why Jesus Christ's role in God's covenants is so vital. Those covenants contain the promise of salvation that He alone, as the Messiah, can make a reality.

Each covenant points to specific aspects of God's ultimate solution to the problem of sin and evil. And the New Covenant deals explicitly with the "heart" aspect of that solution.

The character of covenant recipients

God carefully chose special individuals to convey some of His covenant commitments to the rest of humanity. Each of these special covenant recipients had already been serving God from the heart. Each had a personal relationship with God and was already living a righteous life to the best of his ability and knowledge.

Noah is the first person mentioned specifically in the Bible as entering into a covenant relationship with God. This occurred at a time when all human beings—except for Noah (and apparently his immediate family)—had become completely engrossed in an evil way of life (Genesis 6:5-8; 9:8-11).

The second individual recorded in the Bible with whom God made a personal covenant was Abraham (Genesis 15:18; 17:1-2).

Abraham shared Noah's key character traits. Just as God chose to have a covenant with Noah, a righteous man (Genesis 6:8-9), so He chose Abraham, a man of faith and obedience (Genesis 15:6; 26:5), for this second covenant. From these two examples it becomes clear that God initiated covenants with individuals only if the persons receiving those covenants had already demonstrated that they were willing to obey Him.

These traits of faithfulness and obedience were also present in Moses (Numbers 12:3; Hebrews 11:24-28) and David—as well as in the other prophets who participated in writing the Old Testament scriptures. Concerning David, God says: "I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: 'Your seed [Jesus Christ] I will establish forever, and build up your throne to all generations'" (Psalm 89:3-4).

Paul mentions, concerning the people of Israel, that God "raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.' From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus" (Acts 13:22-23).

Abraham and David are especially significant to the divine promises and covenants most necessary for humanity's salvation. That is why the very first words in the New Testament are: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1).

This opening sentence links Christ's mission directly to the promises made to Abraham and David. The covenants with these men contain the basic promises related to God's plan to offer salvation to all mankind through Jesus Christ.

The covenant with Abraham

To Abraham God promised: "I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"(Genesis 12:2-3).

Here God declares His intention to offer salvation not only to the physical descendants of Abraham but also to "all the families of the earth." But Abraham's descendants were to play a special and vital role in this process—especially the unique descendant of David who would come as the Messiah.

Peter explained to his fellow Jews what Jesus Christ's most challenging role would be: "You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities" (Acts 3:25-26).

This is what the whole world needs most. Only when all of humankind has received a "new heart"—through Christ's active involvement in turning all peoples away from their sins —will God's plan be complete. Peter explained that full reconciliation, as planned by God, requires "every one of you" to turn away "from your iniquities."

That is God's goal. And He has promised to achieve it! His covenants contain His commitments to fulfill that goal.

More details revealed about God's plan

In His covenant with Abraham, God first began to give clear details of His plan. He told Abraham: "I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly . . . and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:2, 6-7).

This covenant anticipated the following key elements of God's plan: God's special relationship with Abraham's descendants, the institution of the kingdom of Israel , the birth and reign of the Messiah over the Kingdom of God and the ultimate salvation of all nations.

Abraham's faith—his implicit trust in and loyalty to God—is ascribed to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). His full confidence in God was the foundation of his character. His trust in God was demonstrated through his obedience (James 2:21-24). Abraham not only believed God, he also understood and faithfully obeyed God's laws as a result of his faith (Genesis 26:5).

Abraham's pattern of faith—demonstrated by his obedience to God—is the model of living faith

that Paul describes in the book of Romans, where he makes the point that even obedient Abraham still needed forgiveness. Speaking of Abraham and his faith, Paul says: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:7-8, NIV).

Abraham's manner of life was that of obeying God from the heart. But even he was not without sin. He still needed forgiveness for the sins he committed—just as do all of us.

That forgiveness is possible only through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But once forgiven, we all are expected to follow Abraham's example in demonstrating our faith by putting our full effort into pleasing God through obedience to Him. That is the righteous response our faith should produce in us.

God's covenant with David

The next covenant to consider between God and a specific person is His covenant with King David.

In it God promises that David's dynasty will last forever and that the Messiah— David's special descendant—is to be the everlasting King of that dynasty. "I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: 'Your seed I will establish forever, and build up your throne to all generations'" (Psalm 89:3-4).

God declares that this covenant will be irrevocable. "Thus says the Lord: 'If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne'" (Jeremiah 33:20-21).

When the time came for the Messiah to be born, notice what the angel announced to the woman chosen to be His mother: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

The apostle Peter also commented on the importance of God's covenant with David: "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.

"Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

"For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."' Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:29-36, NIV).

From the beginning of man's existence, God has been putting into place the details of His great plan for humanity's salvation. Crucial to that plan was the birth and mission of the Messiah—the promised descendant of David and Abraham. To assure us of the irrevocability of that plan, He confirmed it with a series of covenants.

The temporary Sinai Covenant

Understanding the purpose and temporary nature of the covenant that God made with ancient Israel at Mt. Sinai is critical for comprehending the New Testament scriptures correctly. The contents of this covenant became, in effect, Israel's national constitution.

With God as its King, Israel became a theocratic state—essentially a temporary, earthly kingdom of God. Its people accepted all the covenantal conditions God laid out for them, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8).

Amid the thunder, lightning, smoke and fire atop Mt. Sinai, God spoke the Ten Commandments to the entire nation (Exodus 20:1-18).

How did the people respond to Moses? "Surely the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives. Now therefore, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God anymore, then we shall die.

"For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? You go near and hear all that the Lord our God may say, and tell us all that the Lord our God says to you, and we will hear and do it" (Deuteronomy 5:24-27).

The prophets' words as the "voice of the Lord"

They requested, from sheer terror of the awesome power that God manifested to them, that never again would He speak to them directly with His own voice.

From that time forward the inspired words of God's prophets were regarded as carrying the same authority as if God were speaking to the people directly. For example, Moses included—for being obedient to the "voice of the LORD"—"statutes which are written in this Book of Law," statutes given to Israel some 40 years after God spoke at Mt. Sinai (Deuteronomy 30:10-11).

That the writings of the prophets represent accurately the instructions and teachings of God is confirmed in the New Testament: "But first note this: no prophetic writing is a matter for private interpretation. It was not on any human initiative that prophecy [the writings of the prophets] came; rather, it was under the compulsion of the Holy Spirit that people spoke as messengers of God" (2 Peter 1:20-21, REB).

In Deuteronomy 5:28-31, Moses recounts how God accepted the Israelites' request at Mt. Sinai that He would speak to them in the future only though His prophets: "And the Lord heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they

have spoken.

"'Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever! Go, say to them, "Return to your tents." But as for you [Moses], stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess'" (New American Standard Bible).

The people had said all the right words. They had agreed to God's conditions. They had committed themselves to live by all the words that God would speak to them through Moses and the prophets that would come later. But God knew it would take more than their promises to produce the results He desired.

It would require a change in their hearts through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And for the vast majority of them that would become possible only after the Messiah had come to pay the penalty for their sins. Prior to that time God gave His Holy Spirit to only a relatively small number of selected individuals such as Noah, Abraham, David and other prophets and servants as recorded in the Old Testament.

The people of ancient Israel have provided the lesson, through their example, that having righteous laws without a righteous heart is not enough. Their centuries-long example illustrates vividly that receiving knowledge of truth does not by itself produce full and lasting obedience (Romans 3:9-12).

Revealing and defining righteous behavior

The five books written by Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—define the righteous way of life that God desires all peoples and nations to embrace (see Deuteronomy 4:6; 6:4-6; 8:2-3).

The books containing His instructions to them became ancient Israel's supreme religious and legal code. They contained not only the guidelines, laws and procedures by which its citizens were to be judged but also rituals and ceremonies that represented symbolically the kind of relationship God wanted them to have with Him.

They are called in the Hebrew language the Torah (meaning "the teaching" or, more commonly today, "the law"). As Moses explained: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

It was in this Torah that "all His ways" were first committed to writing. These books reveal and define, as the voice of the Lord, the righteous behavior that is the foundation of a godly way of life.

Therefore, at least four decades after the giving of the Sinai Covenant, Moses explained again that what He wrote had indeed come from God: "The Lord your God will make you abound . . . For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers, if you obey

thevoice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law . . ."(Deuteronomy 30:9-10). (Be sure to read "How Can We Obey God's Commandments?".)

The point is that the covenant that God made with ancient Israel was not limited to only the words He spoke at Mt. Sinai. Whatever He would command them—then or in the future—they agreed to do. They asked that from that time forward God would not speak to them personally with His own voice, but through His prophets. Their agreement with God was that they would do all that He would command them—even through the words of the prophets that would follow Moses.

The prophets became God's spokesmen. The messages they received from God, often written in books for later generations, were to be obeyed as "the word of the Lord" (see Isaiah 38:4; Jeremiah 1:4-5; Ezekiel 6:1-3). This same authority was later given to Christ's apostles (Acts 4:29-31).

Today the entire Bible claims authority as the written Word of God. And God promises to bless those who obey it as His Word.

The covenant that offered only temporary benefits

Near the end of Leviticus we find a long declaration of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Leviticus 26:3-45). These blessings and curses gave warning to the ancient Israelites not to take their covenantal relationship and responsibilities lightly.

If they obeyed God, they would enjoy bountiful harvests, good health, prosperity and national security (verses 4-10). These benefits, however, were mostly physical.

A comparison of the material blessings of Leviticus 26:3-13 with those cited in Deuteronomy 28:1-14 reveals a crucial omission in both lists. God agrees to be their God and regard them as His people (Leviticus 26:11-13; Deuteronomy 28:9). But no promise of eternal life is included in this covenant. Its blessings related mostly to what people could enjoy in this present physical life.

Exceptions were made for those servants and prophets of God who were given the Holy Spirit during that time. This is confirmed by Peter who explains: "Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow" (1 Peter 1:10-11, KJV).

That is significant for a major reason! In the New Testament explanation of covenants and law, it is made very clear that eternal life is available only though faith in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah (Acts 4:12). The prophets of old looked forward in faith to the day when the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would make that sacrifice for them.

At the time of the Sinai Covenant, the Messiah had not yet come. So eternal life was not offered to the people in that covenant, with the exception of those special servants who led and taught the people in God's ways. The Holy Spirit was not made available to the rest of the people.

But far from the Sinai Covenant and God's law being a burden, as they now are often represented, they bestowed on all the people of Israel an amazing array of blessings and benefits.

Blessings for obedience

Though the Sinai Covenant sealed a unique relationship between the Israelites and God, it contained one essential condition. The benefits of that relationship were—for their own good—available to them only if they did their part by following His instructions! They had to faithfully put into practice all that they had agreed to do. And they had agreed to follow all the instructions God was giving them—to, in effect, become a "holy people."

Had they diligently kept their part of that agreement, they would have become the envy of the world, an incredibly blessed nation. No other nation on earth would have enjoyed the degree of blessings and benefits that God would have given them. They would have become the showcase of righteousness for all nations around them.

As God explained to them through Moses: "See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:5-7, NASB).

God's laws define behavior that naturally results in peace, safety and prosperity. If the people of Israel had obeyed God, to the best of their natural ability, they would have reaped His promised blessings to the extent that neighboring nations could have noticed that they also might enjoy the same wonderful benefits if only they would also adopt the same laws.

Therefore, in the next verse Moses challenged the Israelites to ask themselves, "What great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" (verse 8, NASB).

Not only were they promised abundant physical blessings, they also had received from God the world's most fair and righteous system of governance!

The limits of physical blessings

One major limitation is present in this rosy picture—the selfish, stubborn inclinations of all human beings. Moses explained to the Israelites: "Know, then, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people . . . you have been rebellious against the Lord from the day you came out of the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 9:6-7, NRSV).

God knew in advance that without the gift of His Holy Spirit the people of Israel, like all other peoples, would not be able to fully live up to their promise to obey Him. However, they could have obeyed what they were taught much better than most of them did. This is evident in their history. During some limited periods the entire nation was mostly observant of God's

instructions (Joshua 24:31; 2 Chronicles 32:26).

Significantly, the Israelites were given every natural advantage any people could desire—lacking only the super natural help of God's Holy Spirit, which would have enabled them to have a consistently righteous heart. Without a divinely changed heart, it is impossible for any people to consistently live a fully obedient life.

Though some individuals are more law abiding than others, none has succeeded in living without sin. That problem has been present in all peoples of all nationalities and cultures throughout human history. Only by receiving God's Spirit can that problem be eliminated. And not until Christ returns to rule all nations will it finally be resolved worldwide.

As Paul observed of mankind, quoting Psalm 14:3, "They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good [consistently], no, not one" (Romans 3:12). This is the lesson we must learn so we will never be tempted to think that the Sinai Covenant was a failure. It accomplished precisely what God intended it to accomplish.

An interim arrangement

The Sinai Covenant is not the complete, final model for our relationship with God. Though it contained many permanent, eternal principles, many of its figurative benefits, instructive as they were, represented only symbolically the far better benefits included in the New Covenant relationship with God that was established later by Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah.

As Hebrews 9:9-10 explains, the ritualism of the covenant at Sinai "was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

A future revision of that covenant—particularly in those features linked to the death and mission of the coming Messiah—was promised. God announced through His prophets that with this "better covenant" He would put His laws in the minds of humanity and He would write them on their hearts. He promised to provide—at the individual level—direct access to Him (Hebrews 8:6; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

It should now be made eminently clear that God was not blindsided by Israel's failures. He anticipated them. From the beginning He revealed hints of a "better" solution to the sinfulness of mankind that could be made available only through the coming Messiah. Those "hints," in the form of various ceremonies, symbols and rituals, are woven throughout the instructions given under the Sinai Covenant.

God's permanent solution to humanity's unrighteousness

The problems caused by human weaknesses and desires (see James 1:14-15) extended far beyond the boundaries of ancient Israel. They cause problems for all peoples. Thus, in crafting

a permanent solution, God has taken into consideration much more than merely the welfare of the Israelites. His solution applies to all peoples in all nations.

As He promised Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Before that permanent solution is made available to more than the present "little flock" of truly obedient Christians who are given God's Spirit in this "present evil age" (see Luke 12:32; Galatians 1:4), all of humanity must learn some essential lessons.

God uses the experiences of ancient Israel, as recorded in Scripture, to help all of mankind, including the Israelites themselves, learn how easily we succumb to sin. Eventually all nations are destined to comprehend why sin is so terrible and why so much more than human effort is required to erase it from the heart.

In the Sinai Covenant with ancient Israel, God comprehensively and permanently defined the fundamentals of righteous behavior. But giving them the knowledge of God's laws did not automatically put righteousness in their hearts and minds.

The needed transformation occurs only in those who receive additional spiritual help through the gift of the Holy Spirit. To receive God's Spirit, one first must be called of God (John 6:44, 65) and genuinely repent of, or turn from, sin (Acts 2:38). God did not make His Spirit generally available until after Jesus Christ was crucified and resurrected so that He could serve as the Mediator of the New Covenant.

Once sin entered the picture in the Garden of Eden, God chose to delay making His Spirit available to mankind—except to the few He used as His special servants and prophets—until after Jesus Christ's death, at which time He became mankind's Redeemer.

That is why understanding Christ's sacrificial and priestly roles in a "better covenant" that provides the means for receiving forgiveness of sin and the precious gift of the Holy Spirit is so vital.

These additions are the vitally important enhancements to the Old Covenant that God made with the people of ancient Israel. They will enable their descendants, who are to be gathered back to the Holy Land by Jesus Christ at His return (Jeremiah 23:5-8), to have a personal relationship with God that only a few of their forefathers ever experienced.

God promises for that time: "'This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.' In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:10-13, NRSV).

This passage is quoting God's promise of a New Covenant as given in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Only a few decades after Jesus Christ was crucified, and not long after these words were written, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and the entire ceremonial and sacrificial system attached to it came to an end. It truly became obsolete.

Once the sacrifice of Christ was in place, those temple ceremonies and rituals were simply no

longer needed. But as Hebrews 8:10-13 clearly tells us, the spiritual laws that God had included in the Sinai Covenant were not disbanded. With the Spirit of God now available, the principles of love that the law so eloquently expressed can finally be written in the hearts of all who repent of breaking them.

That is the central promise of the New Covenant.

Did Abraham Keep the Same Commandments God Gave to Moses?

Most religious teachers say that God's commands given through Moses applied only to ancient Israel and are not for us today. But in drawing that conclusion, most of them overlook the full significance of what God said about Abraham's obedience in Genesis 26:5, hundreds of years before God spoke to Moses and Israel at Mt. Sinai: "Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws" (NIV).

The Hebrew words God uses here are especially important. As The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains regarding this verse: "The Lord then added a remarkable note: Abraham 'kept my requirements [mismarti], my commands [miswotay], my decrees [huqqotay] and my laws [wetorotay]' (v. 5).

"It is remarkable that this is precisely the way in which obedience to the Sinai Covenant is expressed in Deuteronomy 11:1: 'Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements [mismarto], his decrees [huqqotayw], his laws [mispatayw] and his commands [miswotayw]' . . .

"Thus Abraham is an example of one who shows the law written on his heart (Jeremiah 31:33). He is the writer's ultimate example of true obedience to the law, the one about whom the Lord could say, 'Abraham obeyed me' (v. 5). Thus, by showing Abraham to be an example of 'keeping the law,' the writer has shown the nature of the relationship between the law and faith. Abraham, a man who lived in faith, could be described as one who kept the law" (Vol. 2, 1990, pp. 186-187, emphasis added).

Abraham obeyed the same foundational spiritual laws that were given later to Israel. However, the symbolic tabernacle or temple ceremonies and rituals and Israel's national administrative laws were not applicable in Abraham's day. Nor are they necessary for individual Christians today, because a physical temple is no longer the center of our worship as it was in the ancient nation of Israel (John 4:19-21; Hebrews 9:9-10).

Thus, Abraham knew a lot more about God's requirements for and definitions of righteous behavior than most religious teachers give him credit for today. It also means that the laws defining righteous attitudes and behavior that were given to Israel were known and practiced by servants of God long before the Sinai Covenant was ever established.

How Can We Obey God's Commandments?

Many sincere religious people lament, "Oh, I wish I could live up to the Ten Commandments, but I know I can't." In their minds, keeping God's commandments is an unattainable goal. Underlying this perception is a major misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of God's Ten Commandments.

These commandments can be obeyed, at least in the outward letter of the law, by ordinary people even if they have not yet received God's Holy Spirit. For example, any human being is capable of not worshipping an idol, treating parents with respect, not murdering another person, not committing adultery or not stealing what belongs to someone else.

This is the level of obedience that God expected from ancient Israel and He now expects in repentance even before one is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit.

A higher level of righteousness

But from the beginning, God desired more from human beings. He is more interested in what comes out of the heart and whether what is in the heart is enthusiastically demonstrated by one's actions. It is in the heart and mind that He wants to write the full intent and meaning of His laws.

Jesus Christ addressed this in a parable about a servant who does only what his master demands (Luke 17:7-8). Jesus posed this question to His disciples: "Does he [the master] thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (verses 9-10).

Jesus pointed out that there is a higher level of righteousness that goes beyond the limited written demands of the Ten Commandments—a spirit or spiritual intent of the law that goes beyond the mere letter of the law (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

Jesus summarized that standard: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Those two great commandments summarize the ultimate righteousness that God is creating in His children.

That level of love for God and our fellow human beings exceeds what any person is capable of having and expressing fully without the divine help that God makes available to us through the power of His Holy Spirit. It is a level of love that is in direct opposition to the selfish tendencies of our fleshly nature (James 1:13-15; 4:1-3).

To receive the Holy Spirit, each of us must first repent of transgressing the Ten Commandments of God, which we should have been striving to obey already.

Basic steps to real repentance

So what are some of the basic steps to that real repentance that God requires before He will give us His Spirit?

First, we must acknowledge that God's commandments are spiritual in nature (Romans 7:14) as well as being holy, just and good (verse 12).

We must recognize also that God will not establish an eternal relationship with one who willfully chooses to continue transgressing His law (Isaiah 59:1-2). We need to recognize and acknowledge that His laws are wonderful and endure forever (Psalm 119:129, 160). So the first act of repentance is to willingly choose to obey God's commandments as the only acceptable foundation for a right relationship with Him and Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:16-19; Luke 6:46).

Accepting Jesus Christ's sacrifice as payment for our past sins through baptism so that we may receive the Holy Spirit is the next major step. "Now . . . they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:37-38).

When this happens—with genuine spiritual understanding and sincerity—a whole new level of righteous development begins. This is the kind of righteousness that God wants us to strive to develop with the help He makes available through His Spirit.

As Paul expressed it: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:12-15).

In this way God raises the relationship we have with Him through Jesus Christ from obedience to just the letter of His law to a deep, selfless love for Him and His way of life and our fellow human beings. The history of mankind makes it clear that this level of righteousness has never and can never be attained by human effort alone.

But if we repent of our selfish ways that lead us into sin and surrender our lives unconditionally to our heavenly Father, we can accept Christ's sacrifice for our sins and receive forgiveness. God then promises that we "may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4, NIV).

The Sinai Covenant and the 'Voice of the Lord'

The covenant that God made with the ancient Israelites at Mt. Sinai—to give them His special blessings and protection—was conditional on their obedience to His instruction. God promised them, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people" (Exodus 19:5).

After hearing God speak the Ten Commandments with His own voice, and witnessing "the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking," the Israelites pleaded with Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die" (Exodus 20:18-19, NRSV).

God accepted their request because the agreement He required from them was that they would obey His revealed instructions whenever and however they would receive them—whether from His mouth or from the mouth of His prophets. From that time forward His prophets acted as the "voice of the Lord" to the people. Notice how plainly this is confirmed 40 years later—long after Israel had received five full books of detailed instructions from God through Moses.

At that time the Israelites had just reconfirmed their covenant to obey God. So Moses assured them: "For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. For this commandment which I [Moses] command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off" (Deuteronomy 30:9-11). Moses' words clearly still represented God's voice.

In other words, the content of the Sinai Covenant was not limited just to the instructions given at Mt. Sinai. The Israelites' agreement to obey the voice of the Lord included obeying instructions given through Moses long after they left Mt. Sinai.

Therefore, those who claim that the Sinai Covenant included only the Ten Commandments and possibly the extra information given in Exodus 20 to 24 fail to understand that the command to obey the "voice of the Lord" was far more expansive. It meant that the Israelites were to do whatever God told them to do— with no limitations on when His instructions would be given. The only options were to obey or to refuse to obey God's instructions, even when delivered through His prophets.

God's 'Laws, Statutes and Judgments'

When God organized the people of Israel into a nation under the Sinai Covenant, through the human leadership of Moses, He authorized an administrative system that included not only priests but also judges to keep them on the path of righteousness (Deuteronomy 1:16-17). These judges were to perform their assigned duties according to the laws, statutes and judgments that God would reveal to them, either directly (as with the Ten Commandments) or through His messengers.

Though a variety of terms are used in the Scriptures to describe God's instructions to His people and their officials, they usually are summarized under the three broad categories of "statutes and judgments and laws" (Leviticus 26:46, King James Version). These terms describe distinctions in the way God's instructions are viewed rather than their validity or importance. They all represent His will. All of them were to be respected and followed.

The Hebrew word translated "law" is torah. When used with the definite article (the law), it refers either to law in general or to some specific aspect of law. It often refers to the entire body of law that God gave to the people of Israel.

Torah also carries the broader meaning of "teachings," especially when used without the definite article. Sometimes, when used so broadly, the word even appears to imply the entire body of revealed instruction contained in the Old Testament scriptures.

The word "statutes" refers to a specific type of laws. As the English translation of the Hebrew words choq or chuqqah, the word "statute" refers to an authoritative enactment, decree or ordinance.

Biblical statutes may set appointed times, such as sacred festivals, define important customs and even establish the manner or procedure by which certain vital matters are to be handled. Because they reveal God's thinking and reflect His priorities, they are crucially instructive as divine guidelines for righteous behavior.

"Judgments" are decisions handed down by judges to explain, broaden or narrow the application of existing law. To ensure that human judges would have meaningful guidelines and precedents to follow in exercising their judicial responsibilities, God provides examples of how He judges in the Scriptures.

God's judgments illustrate how righteous decisions should be made according to the principles revealed in His laws and statutes. He instructs all judges who are responsible for making judgments not specifically covered in the Torah: "In controversy they shall stand as judges, and judge it according to My judgments. They shall keep My laws and My statutes . . ." (Ezekiel 44:24).

He also tells them: "You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:15).

Taken together, God's laws, statutes and judgments lay the foundation for a righteous society

and the administrative procedures needed to govern it. They all contain principles that are applicable to all peoples and are broad enough to be adapted to new situations.

Key Elements of the Sinai Covenant

The Sinai Covenant's total package of law, the entire five books written by Moses, was designed to cover in principle every major aspect of national life in ancient Israel.

It dealt with penalties for criminal acts, how judges should decide criminal cases, safeguards against poverty, conduct of the priesthood, the design and physical trappings of the tabernacle, ceremonial cleanliness, animal control, instruction on morality, tithing, sacred festivals, agriculture, health principles and many other aspects of life.

The breadth and exhaustive detail of its requirements reflected its orientation. It defined a system of governance for a nation whose citizens, except for a few selected leaders, did not have God's Spirit.

It was created for people whose hearts were spiritually hardened, whose minds did not perceive the full spiritual intent of God's teachings (Matthew 13:15; Acts 28:27; quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10). Though it instructed the people to draw near to God and serve Him faithfully, it held national and local leaders responsible for their obedience. For the good of all, it also prescribed specific punishments for those who refused to be obedient.

Israel's tabernacle—later its temple—was the center of its national worship of God. Exodus 25 to 31 describes in great detail how the tabernacle was designed and consecrated. The same care is given to describing the vestments and responsibilities of Aaron and other priests. Detailed instructions relating to the tabernacle's craftsmen, sacred articles and offerings are included (Exodus 35:4-36:1). How the tabernacle was to be constructed is carefully explained (Exodus 36:2-40:38).

The book of Leviticus highlights a variety of other ceremonial aspects of the Sinai Covenant. Especially detailed are the instructions concerning duties of the priesthood, daily animal sacrifices and more sacrifices on weekly Sabbaths and annual festivals. This covenant was rich in ceremonies and rituals that were characteristic of the temporary and mostly physically oriented relationship between ancient Israel and God (see Hebrews 8:1-5).

Yet its rituals also symbolized the greatly improved spiritual relationship the Messiah was to establish with all Israelites in the future. Included in that better relationship will be not only the Jews but also the restored descendants of the other tribes of Israel who—in the future—are prophesied to return to their homeland (Jeremiah 23:5-8), as well as all other nations and all who are willing to submit to God and learn of His ways (Micah 4:1-4).

Rightly Understanding 'Justification' and 'Righteousness'

The words righteous or righteousness in English translations of the Scriptures describe primarily personal character as demonstrated in appropriate behavior. But justify, justified and justification have a slightly different focus.

Scholars, while correctly defining justification as meaning "to impute righteousness" or "to be declared righteous," may draw wrong conclusions from these definitions. Though not technically inaccurate, using the English words righteous and righteousness in defining or describing justification sometimes obscures important contextual and behavioral distinctions between how Paul in particular uses the words righteousness and justification.

In Paul's letters the focus of justification is mostly on the legal acquittal of guilt, while righteousness is used mostly in reference to virtuous character. Justification—being legally declared free from guilt—does not instantly make one perfectly righteous. Paul makes it very clear that growth in godly righteousness is a process.

That process starts with baptism, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). But attaining the mature righteousness of Jesus Christ is a goal toward which we must continue to strive. It is not bequeathed to us instantaneously but comes through a spiritual growth process as we learn from the Scriptures through the guidance of others who have preceded us in Christ.

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-15).

To remain justified after being forgiven, one must behave in a righteous or just manner from that time forward. In other words, the faith required to be justified must be confirmed in one's actions. As James explains: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified [made just] by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:21-24).

However, James' words do not in any way imply that forgiveness of sin is earned by one's works. He is only confirming that, once forgiven, continuing in righteous living is necessary. The power and ability to do this comes from God. Notice how Paul explains this: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who [actively] works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible gives this distinction in the words justification and righteousness: "Neither the Heb[rew] nor the Greek original allows of any other definition of 'justify' than 'count just'; it is a term of ethical relationship, not ethical quality, and signifies the footing on which one is set towards another, not the character imparted to one" (1996, "Justification, Justify," emphasis added). In other words, once forgiven, one's status in God's eyes is that of a "just" or "righteous" person. The empowerment of God's Spirit enables one to continue in righteousness.

But much character building still lies ahead. A justified person is not to take his righteousness for granted. It must be increased according to the example of righteousness set by Jesus Christ. Each child of God is expected to learn and grow toward "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Did the Ten Commandments Exist Before Moses?

Many people assume that the Ten Commandments and the covenant God established with ancient Israel are identical—and that both were abolished by Jesus Christ's death. They believe that the Sinai Covenant and God's commandments came into existence together and went out of existence together.

But is such reasoning biblical? The facts show it is not. A close look at the Scriptures reveals that breaking the Ten Commandments was a sin before the covenant at Mt. Sinai, so arguments that they came into existence with that covenant and were terminated with it cannot be true. Let's notice the scriptural proof.

God's Word defines sin as "the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV) or "lawlessness" (New King James Version, NIV). Therefore, "where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). This is what the Bible clearly says! So do we find transgressions of the Ten Commandments described as sinful before Mt. Sinai? Clearly we do.

For example, Genesis 13:13 tells us that "the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinful against the Lord." Since sin is violating God's law, the people of Sodom could not have been punished for being wicked and sinful if no law condemned what they were doing. We must conclude, therefore, that God had already made available the knowledge of what is sinful.

Here is a clear example. Genesis 20:3-9 and 39:7-9 describe adultery as "a great sin" and a "sin against God." Adultery breaks the Seventh Commandment.

In Genesis 3:6 and 17, God punishes Adam and Eve for their coveting and stealing—breaking the Tenth and Eighth Commandments. They also dishonored Him as their parent, violating the Fifth Commandment.

In Genesis 4:9-12, God punishes Cain for murder and lying—violations of the Sixth and Ninth Commandments.

In Exodus 16:4, several days to several weeks before God established His covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, we find God giving them a test to see "whether they will walk in My law or not." His test involved whether they would rest on the seventh-day Sabbath as He commanded in the Fourth Commandment of that law—with which they were at least partly familiar. The seventh day had been hallowed—set aside as holy by God—from the time of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:1-3).

God's reaction to their disobedience is revealing. He exclaims, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (Exodus 16: 28). God clearly speaks of both His "commandments and . . . laws" as already existing and in force well before He listed the Ten Commandments verbally at Mt. Sinai, as described four chapters later! Therefore, the Ten Commandments were only codified—written in stone as part of a formal covenant—at Mt. Sinai. Scripture clearly shows that they existed and were in force well before then.

This is stated explicitly in Genesis 26:5, where God tells Isaac that He blessed his father Abraham "because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." This event took place centuries before the covenant at Mt. Sinai, centuries before Moses and two generations before Judah, head of the tribe that much later would become known as the Jews, was born! (Be sure to read "Did Abraham Keep the Same Commandments God Gave to Moses?" on page 13).

In Leviticus 18:21 and 27, God calls the idolatrous practices of the people of the land of Canaan "abominations"—actions so filthy and degrading that God compared their expulsion to being "vomited out" of the land (verse 28). What was their sin? Among other things, idolatry (the worship of false gods) and human sacrifice, which violated the First, Second and Sixth Commandments.

The Bible shows that the Ten Commandments did not originate with Moses or in his time. Nor were they in any way limited only to the Jews. They were in effect and known long before Moses or a people known as the Jews existed. They are the foundation of God's laws that show us how to love God (defined by the first four Commandments) and how to love our fellow man (defined by the last six).

This is why, after Jesus Christ returns to establish His glorious Kingdom on earth, Isaiah 2:3 tells us that "many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

At that time, all of mankind will at last be taught to live according to all of God's laws and commandments!

God's Law: Is It a Burden or a Blessing?

The most common teaching today about the law God gave to ancient Israel is that it was a burden—one that Jesus Christ had to remove. In essence, advocates of that view claim that God freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery merely to enslave them again to a system of law so strict and unreasonable that they claim it is actually oppressive.

Is something seriously wrong with this reasoning? The apostle John says there is. In combating similar arguments in the first century, John states unequivocally, "His commandments are not burdensome," explaining that "this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (1 John 5:3).

So why did God give His law? He repeatedly states that He gave it to benefit the people—to bring great blessings on them. Notice how clearly the following verses state this truth:

• "You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days" (Deuteronomy 4:40).

• Immediately after giving the Ten Commandments, God exclaimed: "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29).

• "You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess" (Deuteronomy 5:33).

• "You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, His testimonies, and His statutes which He has commanded you. And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may be well with you" Deuteronomy 6:17-18).

• "Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you . . . You shall be blessed above all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).

• "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

• Psalm 119 (the Bible's longest chapter) is an extended praise of God's laws for the wisdom and blessings that result from obeying them.

Many other passages express the same point, some even spelling out specific blessings for obeying specific commands. Two entire chapters—Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—provide a vivid contrast between the wonderful national blessings that would result from Israel's people keeping God's laws and the terrible consequences they would suffer for rejecting them.

God's laws were designed to bring blessings. They define behavior that naturally results in peace, safety and prosperity. Deuteronomy 4:5-7 tells us that if Israel had obeyed God, they would have reaped God's promised blessings to the extent that neighboring nations would have stood up and taken notice—and then would have chosen the same laws for themselves so they could enjoy the same wonderful benefits!

Clearly God's laws are not a burden, as some people think, but a blessing!

A New Covenant for Transforming the Heart

"But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and . . . he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises" (Hebrews 8:6, NRSV).

God planned from the beginning to transform the limited and temporary covenant He made with ancient Israel—with its abundance of symbolic sacrifices—into a far superior covenant commitment with a permanent sacrifice for sin open to all of mankind.

God's covenants contain a variety of promises. Yet, in one sense, they all reflect a single commitment. Through them God is making known key aspects of His plan for man's redemption from sin so salvation may be offered to all peoples. He has determined to ultimately give everyone an opportunity through Jesus Christ to enter His everlasting family of holy and righteous sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18; 2 Peter 3:9). God has never wavered in this commitment since the beginning of His creation.

John states, "But as many as received Him [Jesus Christ], to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). Through Jesus Christ, we can attain the destiny God planned for us—to become members of His divine, holy family, a future planned for mankind long ago.

Paul adds: "In him [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:7-10, NRSV).

Therefore His "new" covenant is a "better covenant" that offers the "better promises" related to eternal life that were not included in the Sinai Covenant. God chose not to make those better promises—especially forgiveness of sin through Christ's sacrifice and the gift of the Holy Spirit—available to everyone until after Jesus had been crucified.

A key objective of those better promises is to set in motion the process of transforming the hearts and minds of those who respond to God's call to repent and accept Christ as their Redeemer. Through that process He offers to make them heirs of "the eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15).

God's call to repentance is scheduled to be presented to humanity in stages—with most of mankind receiving that call only after the second coming of Christ. During this "present evil age" (see Galatians 1:4), God is calling a much smaller segment of humanity to repentance to serve as "the light of the world" and to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 5:14; 28:19).

A comparison of the two covenants

A primary distinction between the Old and New Covenants is in where God's law is written (Jeremiah 31:31-34; compare Ezekiel 36:26-28)—not in whether it continues to define His will.

Under the New Covenant the spirit or intent of the law is to be inscribed in the hearts of those who are converted by receiving the Holy Spirit. This required a change in the law as to who would hold the office of high priest, giving us a High Priest who could assist us in obeying God from the heart (Hebrews 7:12).

The new focus is on heartfelt repentance that leads to forgiveness of sin through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We are also told to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2)—with the spiritual help supplied by God's Spirit.

The Sinai Covenant's rituals and sacrifices could only remind the people of their guilt and their need for redemption. They could not cancel their guilt—blot out their sins: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Under the New Covenant, however, Jesus Christ's sacrifice blots out permanently the sins of those who repent and cancels their guilt (John 1:29; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5).

Significantly, the New Covenant first had to be offered to the same people who had received the Sinai Covenant—the physical descendants of Abraham. All of the apostles, including Paul, honored this requirement. Scripture shows that Paul, when visiting various cities, went to the Jews first, then to the gentiles Acts 13:45-46; Romans 1:16).

Peter explained why the Jews had to be given the first opportunity to accept Christ as their Savior: "Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days [of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant].

"You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers . . . To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities" (Acts 3:24-26; compare Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63).

Providing a permanent sacrifice for sin—first to Jews and then to the gentiles—so genuine reconciliation with God through Christ would open the door for God's laws to be written in the heart by the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of the New Covenant. The gift of His Spirit to those who repent and are baptized provides the "missing dimension" in the human mind that makes this "better" relationship between God and His people work (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4).

A personal relationship with our new High Priest

Hebrews 7 explains another change from the Sinai Covenant to the New Covenant. Under the Sinai Covenant, the high priest was a physical human being from the tribe of Levi, serving in the physical tabernacle or temple until his death. Jesus, however, born of the tribe of Judah, is now our eternal High Priest, serving in heaven with direct access to God the Father.

Notice how plainly this is stated in Hebrews 8:1-2: "The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (NIV).

Unlike the high priest under the Old Covenant, Jesus Christ as High Priest can personally assist every individual called by God. "They will all know me," He says, "from the least of them to the greatest" (verse 11, NIV). This huge advantage of the New Covenant was not available under

the Sinai Covenant with only a physical high priest.

Jesus, although divine and immortal, can still personally identify with our weaknesses and problems because of what He experienced as a human being: "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God . . . Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:17-18, NIV).

As High Priest, Jesus is willing and eager to help Christians in their struggles to overcome sin. "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Symbolic rituals no longer needed

The temple-based system of worship under the Old Covenant came to an end in A.D. 70 when Roman armies captured Jerusalem and completely destroyed the Jewish temple and the priesthood system.

As the book of Hebrews explains about the introduction of a new covenant, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:13, NIV; compare Matthew 24:1-2). By indicating the destruction of the temple beforehand and then allowing it to happen, just as foretold, God ended the Sinai Covenant's system of worship.

Notice this clear explanation of the temporary nature of that tabernacle/temple system: "Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place.

"Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had . . . the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory [over the mercy seat] . . .

"When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.

"This is an illustration for the present time [before the temple system was destroyed in A.D. 70], indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order [established through the New Covenant]" (Hebrews 9:1-10, NIV).

Notice how explicitly the parts of the Sinai Covenant that had to be altered are defined in this passage.

Hebrews explains temporary aspects

These temporary aspects of the Sinai Covenant were applicable only until everything they symbolized was fulfilled by or through Jesus Christ. It is essential that we understand accurately what the book of Hebrews explains.

The author of Hebrews does not say that the laws of God defining righteousness were changed or abolished by the New Covenant or that they were only temporary. He does explain that the Sinai Covenant's symbolic features—summarized as "food and drink and various ceremonial washings" are no longer necessary under the New Covenant. Indeed, it would soon become impossible to continue them because in A.D. 70 the physical temple, to which they were inherently linked, was completely destroyed.

The fact that these examples are restricted to physical items, all having only symbolic significance, is crucially important! The laws of God that define sin are not included among those items explicitly identified as terminated with the destruction of the temple.

The focus in Hebrews is entirely on things associated with the symbolic worship system of the physical tabernacle (and the later temple complex) and the temporary Levitical priesthood. Notice its explanation:

"When Christ came as high priest . . . he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this [physical] creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

"The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

"For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Hebrews 9:11-15, NIV).

The tabernacle/ temple ministry or service of the Sinai Covenant was only symbolic and temporary. In contrast, the spiritual ministry of Jesus Christ focuses on an "eternalinheritance" because it offers "eternal redemption" to those whose hearts are transformed by God's Spirit.

However, God's laws defining righteousness are not symbolic or temporary. The Psalms depict them as "wonderful" and "perfect," destined to last "forever" (Psalms 19:7; 119:129, 160).

Paul describes God's law as "holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." He then adds, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (Romans 7:12, 14, NIV). He taught that the problem that the New Covenant solves is the un spiritual responses of man, not some supposed defect in God's spiritual laws.

Jesus upholds obedience to Old Testament laws

Since many aspects of the Sinai Covenant were temporary, those who serve God under the New Covenant need to understand Jesus Christ's explanation of what is not included in the changes that had to be made. He was fully aware that the needed changes made by the New Covenant could be easily misinterpreted.

So in His famous Sermon on the Mount, He confirmed emphatically that the Old Testament scriptures would continue as the guide for Christian conduct. Notice His clear statement:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill [to fill up the law to its fullest intent and purpose and to become the High Priest and ultimate sacrifice foreshadowed in both the Law and the Prophets]. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18, NRSV).

Jesus is very specific. The Old Testament is to remain unaltered, with a new understanding that its figurative aspects merely point to His role as our permanent High Priest and ultimate sacrifice.

But the entire Old Testament—every word and character—is to be preserved and used by Christians. Jesus makes it very clear that not even a part of a single letter of that original text is to be deleted or changed. He came to bring to pass what God had promised or foretold in His Word, not to discard or annul it. Even the sections describing the ceremonial aspects of the Sinai Covenant still teach us valuable lessons about the importance of Jesus Christ's work and sacrifice for us, as the book of Hebrews explains in some detail.

Jesus forcefully confirmed that His preaching should never be interpreted as nullifying any part of the Old Testament scriptures: "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least [by those] in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great [by those] in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19, NRSV).

Through the remainder of Matthew 5 He gives many examples that show the law's requirements are even more binding on Christians, not less. He does this by illustrating the spiritual intent of the law that should govern our very thoughts and attitudes in addition to our actions.

Paul concurs with Jesus on the Old Testament

Paul, like Jesus, boldly tells us, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

"All Scripture is God-breathed" (NIV) is the literal translation of the first part of Paul's statement. Jesus and Paul both present the entire body of Old Testament scripture as divinely inspired and essential for equipping Christians to serve God.

Yet Paul did not say that Christians are required to perform—precisely as written—every detail given to ancient Israel. His emphasis is that all of it is profitable or useful—though not every detail is required of Christians for reasons explained above.

What then is not required? That also has been made very clear. Most symbolic aspects of Old Testament instructions are not now required. They were "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation" (Hebrews 9:10).

Jesus Christ's sacrifice replaced those symbolic aspects of the law that were merely temporary rituals. Though they were not spiritual commands, their value in explaining the role of Jesus as our High Priest and sacrifice for sin still exists. They still serve as important teaching tools.

This distinction in their use today is important! Temporary aspects of Old Testament legislation never defined sin. They usually represented how Jesus Christ would pay for sin or, as with the symbolic meaning of circumcision, that our fleshly inclination to sin needs to be removed.

When God thundered the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, He declared that He would show "mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:6). His merciful forbearance of ancient Israel's repeated disobedience under the Sinai Covenant is a type of the much greater level of mercy and redemption that the "new covenant in [Christ's] blood" (Luke 22:20) now offers to those who repent.

For human beings to receive that mercy, the Son of God had to become our sacrifice for sin. In the epistles of the New Testament the word death is used more than 60 times in reference to either the penalty for sin or the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The entire sacrificial system of ancient Israel was given to emphasize that forgiveness of sin requires the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22).

We must never forget that all Scripture is inspired and vital for our lives. All of it lays a solid foundation for Christian doctrine. All of it is profitable for instructing us in righteousness. Without it we could never be sure what righteousness is.

Here is an important principle: To properly understand the New Testament, we must first understand the Old Testament. The New Testament is not written as a replacement for the Old Testament. Rather the Old Testament is the basis and foundation of the New Testament (Matthew 5:17-20; Acts 28:23).

Only if we apply the principles of righteousness revealed in all of those Scriptures to our thinking and behavior will we be able to grow to the spiritual maturity that God desires! Only then will we be considered "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work," as Paul instructs us (2 Timothy 3:17).

Jesus expressed this point even more emphatically. "It is written," He said, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). The only Word of God at that time was what we now call the Old Testament scriptures.

According to both Paul and Jesus, those Scriptures are essential to our Christian growth and development. We must study them thoroughly to learn the thinking of God embedded in them. Through their instruction God wants to change our attitudes and thoughts, our hearts and minds, by giving us understanding of His thinking.

He says: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,

and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud . . . so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:9-11).

God's goal is to develop in us the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5)—for us to have the same thinking and outlook that He has. For that to happen, we must have the same trust in, and deep respect for, God's inspired Word that Jesus Christ and Paul had (compare Isaiah 66:2). When we do, those Scriptures become the instruments that transform our thinking and behavior as He intended, if we internalize them with the enabling help and power of God's Spirit.

Other New Covenant improvements

Paul also explained that some aspects of the Scriptures will, of necessity, need to be applied "not of the letter but of the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:6). What did he mean? What distinguishes the "letter" of the law from the "spirit" of the law? And what conditions make this distinction necessary?

One crucial change—the change in the priesthood—gives us the beginning point for understanding this distinction. Jesus Christ replaced the priesthood of Aaron's descendants by becoming our permanent High Priest (Hebrews 7:11-28). This makes a vast difference in the way certain parts of the Old Testament laws are applied.

Verses 18 and 19 explain why Old Testament regulations for the appointment of a high priest had to be modified: "For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment [specifically limiting the priesthood to Aaron's descendants] because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law [requiring high priests to be appointed from Aaron's descendants] made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope [Jesus Christ's appointment as our permanent High Priest], through which we draw near to God."

This change was foretold in the Old Testament scriptures. God promised that the Messiah would be seated at His right hand before returning to earth as the King of Kings: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'" (Psalm 110:1).

This prophecy also confirmed by an oath that the Messiah (Jesus) would be the new, permanent High Priest: "The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (verse 4).

We see that the Old Testament both foretold and authorized the change in who would be the High Priest and how He would administer His office. The book of Hebrews explains the importance of this change in the application of laws governing the appointment and duties of the high priest.

"This was confirmed with an oath; for others [Aaron's descendants] who became priests took their office without an oath, but this one [Jesus] became a priest with an oath, because of the one [God the Father] who said to him, 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever"'—accordingly Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant.

"Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he

continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:20-25, NRSV).

This change in the priesthood required that the law appointing Aaron's descendants to that office be changed. But it did not abolish either the office or the basic role of a high priest.

It only required that laws regarding that office be modified so as to properly apply to Jesus Christ as our permanent High Priest. Therefore those laws are still applicable and profitable—but now according to the "spirit" of the law instead of the precise "letter" of the original text.

As Hebrews 7:12-16 explains: "For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

"And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears [as prophesied in Psalm 110:4], one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life" (NIV).

A superior approach

Paul devotes most of 2 Corinthians 3 to explaining this important difference in the administration of some of the laws written in the Old Testament. They are not abolished. But the application of their text sometimes has to be applied in a way that is compatible with New Covenant realities.

In such instances the "spirit" of the law takes precedence over the letter of the law—with the clear understanding that the "spirit" of the law faithfully preserves the original intent for which any particular law was given. Two important principles stand out.

First, the new emphasis is on where the law is written—in the heart of those whom God calls rather than merely on tablets of stone (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Second, the law's basic principles, intent and purpose are still permanently useful and applicable to all of humanity (see James 1:25; 2:8-12). Even more significant is the fact that the provision for such modification had already been revealed and divinely approved in Psalm 110:4.

It is also important to note that not everything concerning the office of the high priest had to be amended—only the regulations necessary to accommodate Jesus Christ's appointment as our permanent High Priest.

The same principle applies to sacrifices and ceremonies. A change from merely symbolic animal sacrifices to the real and permanent sacrifice of Jesus Christ necessitates an adjustment in the law. But it does not abolish our need for a sacrifice. The law's requirement that a sacrifice be made for sin remains intact. But now it is the sacrifice of Christ that fulfills that requirement (Hebrews 10:4, 10-14, 18).

Therefore, some changes to the law were necessary to amend what was already in the law, to bring it up to date. God's law has not been abolished by the New Covenant, but it now contains

important revisions that accommodate the "better promises" foretold in those very same Scriptures.

The New Covenant administration of law

God especially gives His true and faithful ministers, through the power of His Spirit, the understanding they need to properly discern the intent of the law under legitimate New Covenant contexts (compare Matthew 18:18; Acts 15:1-29).

As Paul explained, "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6, NIV).

A major focus of the Sinai Covenant's "ministry" or priesthood—its service to the people on God's behalf—was to remind them constantly that God condemns both evil and evildoers. The New Covenant ministry is more focused on bringing sinners to heartfelt repentance so they can escape condemnation in the judgment to come (Acts 17:30-31).

Paul describes the Sinai Covenant's approach as "glorious." He never belittles or berates it. God designed both covenants to gloriously fulfill their intended objectives. But the New Covenant is a better covenant that offers eternal forgiveness with eternal life, not just symbolic, temporary forgiveness within the community of Israel for the benefit of physical blessings only.

"If the [old] ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the [new] ministry that brings righteousness [by blotting out sins through the death of Christ and leading people to obedience and eternal life]!

"For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory [of the new administration of righteousness]. And if what was fading away [the Sinai Covenant's physical reminders of the death penalty for sin] came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" (2 Corinthians 3:9-11, NIV).

The Sinai Covenant's glorious reminders of condemnation for guilt through symbolic sacrifices has been replaced by a more glorious and permanent administration of mercy and true righteousness through Jesus Christ as our new and permanent High Priest.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ gives His servants in whose hearts the law is now written the ability to discern how to properly apply the laws of God to their own lives (Jeremiah 31:33; 1 Corinthians 2:11-14; Philippians 1:9-10).

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ," writes Paul, "for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:16-17).

Teaching people how to live righteously because they truly trust God was a vital aspect of Paul's ministry. And the same should be true today.

Proper spiritual discernment

How did Paul and the other apostles discern what parts of the law might have a different application under the New Covenant than they did under the Sinai Covenant?

All godly discernment must fall within the boundaries that are lawfully allowed by the Scriptures. In other words, the law's proper application is determined by the guidelines revealed in the Scriptures themselves, not by our own feelings or opinions. We should never allow the opinions of those who rely on human tradition contrary to the Scriptures to sway us against God's law.

Paul strongly stresses the point that "the law is good if one uses it lawfully" (1 Timothy 1:8). Therefore, Christians need to be cautious not to accept or adopt assumptions that the Scriptures themselves do not support.

Plainly speaking, the Bible interprets the Bible. This is especially important in studying the writings of the apostle Paul, who wrote some passages that many people misunderstand and distort (see 2 Peter 3:15-16).

Because all new Christians need guidance, Paul explains the proper means through which Jesus Christ provides it. He tells us: "It was he [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:11-14, NIV).

A spiritually capable, teaching ministry is essential to our spiritual health and personal growth in the Church that Jesus built. We all need guidance from spiritually qualified ministers of Jesus Christ.

To ensure that Church judgments about the application of Scripture to current situations are sound and accurate, their compatibility with the entire Word of God must be checked thoroughly. As Paul explained to Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, NASB).

Therefore, we must be careful to seek spiritual advice only from ministers who faithfully believe "every word of God" (Luke 4:4) and faithfully teach that "all Scripture" is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

That is why Paul wrote: "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:14-15).

We need to be very careful that ministers and teachers from whom we seek spiritual guidance know the Bible well and teach it accurately—rather than interpreting it according to the traditions of men. Paul warns us to beware of those who "are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:13).

Building on fundamental principles

Sadly, even some of the earliest Christians were negligent in correctly discerning, comprehending and rightly applying the intent of the Scriptures. The author of Hebrews told them that "though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

"For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:12-14). Such ability comes from studying the "word of righteousness" regularly and using it skillfully over an extended period of time.

As mentioned earlier, everything God has revealed to us through His law has one central aim —to teach us to love as He loves. According to the law, that love is focused in two distinct directions: first toward God, and then toward our fellow human beings, all of whom are created in God's image.

The Ten Commandments expand those principles of love. God desires to write the fullness of these principles in our hearts (see "The Ten Commandments: Keys in a Law of Love,").

Let's now turn our attention specifically to how Jesus Christ personally assists those who receive the Holy Spirit—particularly in rightly discerning and applying the principles of God's law under the New Covenant with a pure heart.

What Was the Main Weakness of the Sinai Covenant?

What was the problem with the Sinai Covenant? Most people assume that the problem was in the laws God gave to Israel, that they were flawed and that Jesus Christ came to abolish or annul them. But does this square with the Scriptures?

Hebrews 8:7 tells us that yes, there was a flaw with that covenant: "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (NIV).

So where was the problem? The next verse tells us: "But God found fault with the people and said: 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah'" (verse 8, NIV).

The primary weakness of the Sinai Covenant was not in its laws but in the people's lack of a willing heart to obey them. Because they were not given the Holy Spirit, Israel's citizens were incapable of understanding and performing the full intent and purpose of God's teachings.

Here is how Paul summarizes that fault: "But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

The people of ancient Israel, like most people today, simply could not grasp the full spiritual value of the teachings God gave through Moses. The reason is plain: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV).

How thankful we can be that God, under the terms of the New Covenant, allows us to receive a new spirit that enables us to obey God's laws! As God promises in Ezekiel 11:19-20: "Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God."

How God Balances Justice With Mercy

God is not only the God of justice but also the God of mercy. Both His justice toward those who willfully disobey Him and His mercy toward those who respect Him enough to seek His help so they may obey Him are expressed in the second of His Ten Commandments.

It ends with these words: "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands [or, to the thousandth generation, NRSV], to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

God balances justice with mercy by considering what is in the heart—whether there remains any possibility of repentance. So long as that possibility exists, God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). But there will come a time when those who refuse to repent will perish.

That is why the New Covenant administration of God's law considers first the attitude of the one who has sinned. One who is willing to "sin no more" is eligible for mercy instead of condemnation. But to those who choose to continue sinning Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

How Is the New Covenant 'New'?

In the New Testament the Greek word translated "new" in "new covenant" is, with one exception, kainos. It means "'new' as to form or quality, of a different nature from what is contrasted as old" (Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "New," emphasis added).

Only in Hebrews 12:24 is the different Greek word neos used for "new" in "new covenant."Neos "signifies 'new' in respect to time, that which is recent; it is used of the young, and so translated, especially the comparative degree 'younger'; accordingly what is neos may be a reproduction of the old in quality or character" (ibid., emphasis added).

Neither Greek word translated "new" suggests that every aspect of the Sinai or Old Covenant was replaced. Each only indicates that the more recent covenant has enhanced and improved the quality of the original covenant.

The New Covenant unquestionably provides a better relationship with God than the relationship portrayed only symbolically in the former covenant. To ensure this better relationship, some new features have been added to the "new" (or qualitatively improved) covenant and some obsolete features have been replaced. But features common to both covenants remain unchanged and unaltered.

That new relationship is available only through Jesus Christ, our new High Priest and our real sacrifice for sin. Christ's death, by paying for humanity's sins, has opened the door for all who willingly repent to receive God's Holy Spirit and be accepted by God as His sons and daughters. As our permanent High Priest, Jesus replaces the high priest who was merely a human descendant of Moses' brother, Aaron.

God's "new" covenant also offers enormously better promises. Yet it abandons none of those spiritual principles that eternally reflect God's mind and character. Those principles are explained accurately and adequately enough in the Old Testament scriptures. Jesus and all of His apostles, including Paul, used these Scriptures as their authority for the true teachings of God (Matthew 4:4; Acts 17:2; Romans 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

The Ten Commandments: Keys in a Law of Love

What is love? Most people think of love as a strong emotional feeling toward another person. And to an extent that's true. However, the "love" most often spoken of in the Bible is an outgoing concern for others as demonstrated by our actions (1 John 3:18). And being demonstrated by our actions, it is far greater and more meaningful than mere feelings.

Scripture tells us that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), and His laws, particularly as summarized in the Ten Commandments, show us the actions that demonstrate love toward others—first toward God (as expressed in the first four of the Ten Commandments), and then toward our fellow man (as expressed in the last six).

Jesus Christ, asked to name the greatest commandment, responded: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus here quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. These two commands summarize both the Ten Commandments and the entire law of God, as all God's other instructions flow from these two greatest commands. Let's briefly see how the Ten Commandments show the actions that demonstrate our love to our Creator and our fellow man.

Commandments that show us how to love God

The First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3), tells us that we should love, honor and respect our Creator and heavenly Father so that He alone is the supreme authority in our lives. He alone is God, and we should allow nothing to prevent us from serving and obeying Him. As our Creator and Sustainer, He has given us everything, and wants us to acknowledge Him as the source of all good things and instruction in right living.

The Second Commandment, forbidding worship of idols (verses 4-6), tells us that in our worship we must not reduce God to a likeness of a physical object. To make any representation of Him distorts and limits our perception of what He is really like, and so distorts and damages our relationship with Him. God is far greater than anything we can see or imagine, and idolatry limits Him in our minds.

The Third Commandment, to not take His name in vain (verse 7), focuses on showing respect to our Creator. The quality of our relationship with God depends on the love and regard we have for Him. We are expected to always honor who and what He is, and never disrespect Him in word or action.

The Fourth Commandment, to remember His Sabbath day and keep it holy (verses 8-11), is a key to a right and close relationship with God. By keeping His Sabbath, we are reminded every week that He is our Creator and the source of all good things. The Sabbath day is also a

foretaste of His coming Kingdom, when all of humankind will at last have the opportunity to learn His way of life and experience a personal relationship with Him. The Sabbath day is a rest from our normal work, a commanded assembly, a time to meet with others of like mind and to learn more about God's way of life through His ministry.

Commandments that show us how to love our fellow human beings

The Fifth Commandment, to honor our father and mother (verse 12), sets the tone for the last six. It addresses the importance of our learning to treat fellow human beings with respect and honor. Learning to obey this commandment helps children establish a lifetime pattern of respecting proper rules, traditions, principles and laws. Honoring others should be a normal, natural habit learned during youth, leading to strong families and, in turn, to a strong, stable society.

The Sixth Commandment, forbidding murder (verse 13), tells us that life is a precious gift to be valued and respected. Jesus Christ amplified the meaning of "murder" to include bitter animosity, contempt or hateful hostility toward others (Matthew 5:21-22). God wants us to go far beyond avoiding murder. He wants us to be builders, not destroyers, of good relationships.

The Seventh Commandment, to not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14), is designed to protect one of God's greatest gifts to humanity—the loving marital relationship. It is the foundation of strong families, which are the building blocks of society. Obeying this command helps prevent the pain and suffering that comes on individuals and societies through broken relationships, broken homes, sexually transmitted diseases, poverty and many other ills, while strengthening one of God's greatest blessings to humanity.

The Eighth Commandment, forbidding stealing (verse 15), shows that we need to respect and appreciate the rights and needs of others. God grants us many physical blessings, but they should never be our primary pursuit in life. The battle against selfishness begins in the heart, and we should put giving and serving others ahead of accumulating and lavishing possessions on ourselves.

The Ninth Commandment, forbidding false witness (verse 16), helps us realize that God expects truth to permeate every facet of our lives. Respectful, loving relationships with others are impossible without truth and honesty being the foundation of our interactions. God wants us, as His children, to commit ourselves to truth and reflect it in everything we do.

The Tenth Commandment, telling us not to covet (verse 17), is aimed at the heart and mind of every human being. As with each of the previous nine commandments, it is directed toward our relationships. It specifically deals with respecting the property, possessions and spousal relationships of others and with the covetous thoughts that can potentially hurt ourselves and our neighbors. It seeks to quell the desires that tempt us and lead us astray. Rather than being focused on our own wants, God wants concern for others to be the motivation for our desires.

A law that teaches God's way of love

Each of the Ten Commandments reveals the attitudes and actions that show us how to love God and our neighbor. This is why the apostle John tells us that "whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him" and "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments" (1 John 2:5; 5:2).

Those who argue that the Ten Commandments are somehow abolished or done away have to answer a crucial question: Why would God abolish a law that defines for us how to love Him and our fellow human beings?

The High Priest Essential to Salvation

"Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who . . . has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house" (Hebrews 3:1-3).

With this chapter we begin addressing passages in five New Testament letters that are regularly misunderstood and seriously misinterpreted. Four of these—Galatians, Romans, Ephesians and Colossians—explicitly declare the writer to be the apostle Paul. The other, Hebrews, is traditionally attributed to him, which is likely. Though every section of the Bible is often misinterpreted, passages from Paul's letters in particular are consistently distorted (see 2 Peter 3:15-16), especially where the New Covenant and the law of God are concerned.

We begin in Hebrews, which contrasts the role of Jesus Christ as the mediator of the New Covenant with the role of Moses as mediator of the Old or Sinai Covenant.

Moses was the historical giant of first-century Judaism. When early Christians accepted Jesus Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant, as the Messiah and as a Prophet greater than Moses, most Jews—especially the religious leaders—were highly offended. They refused to accept Jesus as their High Priest or as a prophet greater than Moses.

The implications of this problem are addressed in the book of Hebrews. It was written to explain the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of the Levitical high priest appointed under the Sinai Covenant and to verify from the Scriptures that Jesus Christ is a greater prophet than Moses.

In this context, Hebrews covers the distinctions between the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant—and the role of God's law in each.

Christ's superior priesthood

Because Moses was such a dominant figure in first-century Judaism, most Jews rejected any possibility that Jesus was the "Prophet" that Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15. The Jews of the first century eagerly hoped that prophet would appear in their lifetime (compare Mark 6:14-16; John 1:21, 25; 7:40). But they expected him to come as a great military leader who would organize a Jewish army to liberate them from Roman occupation.

Their common view of themselves was that they were God's righteous victims deserving freedom, not sinners needing His forgiveness. They anticipated a conquering King—not a Savior who would solve the problem of sin by dying for them. As a result, a Messiah who would die for their sins rather than lead a rebellion against the Roman army for the purpose of reestablishing the throne of David was to them a "stumbling block" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The book of Hebrews was written to counter this blinded reasoning and systematically prove from Scripture what the Messiah was really prophesied to be and to do at His first coming.

The author of Hebrews, again probably Paul, uses the Old Testament Scriptures to prove that Jesus Christ is the prophesied Messiah who was explicitly foretold to be a prophet superior to both Moses and Aaron. Those Scriptures also stated that He would be declared the new and much superior High Priest.

Therefore, a clear understanding of the reasoning and content of the book of Hebrews is essential to appreciating just how thoroughly God planned in advance the mission and work of Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, especially that of His first coming.

Son of David and Son of God

In Hebrews 1, the author cites specific scriptures to prove that the prophesied Messiah would come not only as the son of David but also as the Son of God (verse 2), even being the "exact representation" of God (verse 3, NIV). Also, He has "by inheritance obtained a more excellent name" than even the angels (verse 4). The theme of the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ, as the Messiah, continues through the rest of Hebrews.

Because the reign of the Messiah over the kingdom of Israel was so anticipated by the Jews, the author of Hebrews now goes to the Psalms to prove that God intends to keep His promise to once again seat a son of David on the throne of Israel. But the One to take that throne is to be not only a son of David but also the Son of God. Hebrews 1:8 quotes a passage from the Psalms to show that God will establish the "throne" of His "Son" over the " Kingdom" promised to Him.

That quoted passage promises: "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions [the previous prophets] by anointing you with the oil of joy" (Psalm 45:6-7, NIV).

The words "by anointing you" suggest a reference to the Hebrew word for Messiah—the Anointed One. The Greek equivalent is Christos, altered to "Christ" in English.

In Hebrews 2:5 the author continues to show that the Messiah is to be made the divine Ruler over "the world to come" rather than over kingdoms of this present age. Jesus, of course, has already been made the Head of His true Church, the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

In regard to the scope of Christ's rule, the author of Hebrews makes this point: "In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:8-9, NIV).

God's first priority for the Messiah was to provide all of humanity with a Savior—to open the door to justification and salvation for all who would repent. Jesus, the prophesied Messiah, had to first fulfill the mission of that Savior—to preach repentance and then to take on Himself the death penalty for sin that we all deserve. Therefore, His Kingdom was not prophesied to be established at His first coming. But it will be established when He returns.

In chapter 3, the author goes directly to his main point: Moses and Jesus were both faithful to

God, but Christ is greater than Moses (verses 1-3). In God's house, Moses was a faithful servant (verses 4-5). "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (verse 6, NIV). In other words, Christ's position in God's family is superior to Moses and all the other children of God who will enter His eternal family.

To the Jews, the temple was God's house. Before its destruction in A.D. 70, Judaism was a temple-based religion. Almost everything in their worship of God revolved around the temple. But after A.D. 70—following the temple's destruction—Judaism was transformed, of necessity, into a decentralized, synagogue-based religion. Their priests no longer had any viable duties.

Christians, on the other hand, still had "a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14). But the lofty position of this High Priest does not mean that He is out of touch or does not understand what we go through as human beings. Having been human Himself, He is not "a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (verse 15).

A crucial reason for Christ's appointment as High Priest was to secure a solution to the problem of sin—and have a High Priest capable of giving assistance to every person who would kneel in prayer before the throne of God to ask for help. And in Christ we have One who is both eternal and omnipotent as well as One who has experienced life as a human being.

In Hebrews 5 the point is emphasized that the change in the priesthood was instituted through appointment by God the Father. "So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father [quoted from Psalm 2:7].' And he says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek [quoted from Psalm 110:4]'" (Hebrews 5:5-6, NIV).

The perfect High Priest

Next, the book of Hebrews compares Jesus Christ's example of perfect obedience to the same type of obedience He expects from His followers. Chapter 5 continues: "Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (verses 8-9).

Jesus obeyed the Old Testament scriptures. He commands His disciples to follow His example and to teach that same obedience to others (Matthew 28:19-20).

The author of Hebrews then chides those Christians who had neglected developing real skill in rightly applying the Scriptures to their lives: "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word [the Hebrew Scriptures] all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" (Hebrews 5:12-13, NIV).

Then Hebrews 6:1 continues with this appeal: "Therefore let us go on toward perfection" (NRSV). The following verses cover the principles on which that enlightened pursuit of spiritual perfection must be founded and the diligent perseverance we need to continue that pursuit.

Then in chapter 7 the author returns again to Christ's priesthood. He explains that there is a

precedent, a former model, for Jesus Christ receiving the office of High Priest. Scripture foretold explicitly that He would become the High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" instead of "according to the order of Aaron" (verse 11).

Melchizedek was a priest of God hundreds of years before the Levitical priesthood was established (see Genesis 14:18-19). After receiving the tithe (a tenth) of Abraham's recovered spoils following a battle, Melchizedek blessed Abraham. This act of blessing Abraham confirmed that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham.

One may be "blessed" in that manner only by someone greater than oneself. This, therefore, confirms that Jesus, having the same rank as Melchizedek, is superior to Abraham and therefore superior to the Levitical priests who descended from Abraham. This verifies that Jesus Christ, whose birth was not of the priestly tribe of Levi, is nevertheless scripturally legitimate as our new High Priest.

A new Priest necessitates changes in the law

This brings us to the most crucial point covered in this letter to the Hebrews. "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law" (Hebrews 7:12). In chapters 8-10 the author explains that the transfer of the priesthood to Jesus Christ is the central reason that certain modifications in the law were necessary to accommodate this transition.

At this juncture, it is vital that we understand that amending items in an established body of law does not abolish the entire body of law—it only modifies certain portions of it. Grasping this is essential if we are to correctly understand how, why and in what manner the law that began to be written in a book at Mt. Sinai could be modified.

First, we must understand the reason for its modifications. That reason is clearly explained. "Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man" (Hebrews 8:1-2).

Changes in the law became necessary to accommodate a new and permanent High Priest and a new and more accurate concept of the temple in which God would be actively present through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

With Jesus Christ replacing the Levitical high priest, the Church He built would now take precedence over a physical temple.

As Paul explains: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:19-22, NRSV).

New relationship, new emphasis

With these changes, God raised His expectations for His people. The Sinai Covenant did not produce lasting righteousness. Its priests could fulfill only symbolically the role that Jesus Christ fulfills completely under the New Covenant.

So some changes in the law were essential to support this new and better relationship. The new emphasis would be on changing people's hearts and minds rather than on perpetuating an array of symbolic rituals and ceremonies (Hebrews 8:10).

The physical tabernacle with its ceremonial and figurative system of worship was only a temporary measure. Its value was symbolic—figuratively indicating what God had in mind, on a much greater scale, for the future. Its services were also merely "symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (Hebrews 9:9).

None of the ceremonial aspects of the Sinai Covenant could define righteousness in respect to the people's hearts, minds and actions. Those ritualistic services could only remind people of guilt incurred by breaking the spiritual laws that define sin. They were "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation" (verse 10).

That "time of reformation" began with Jesus Christ's first appearance as the Messiah. As the book of Hebrews explains, the temple's ritualistic worship system then in existence represented "only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship" (Hebrews 10:1, NIV).

The use of the word shadow to describe this system of rituals is helpful in understanding what the book of Hebrews tells us about this ceremonial sacrificial system. Just as an approaching shadow reveals the form and outline of what is coming, so did the Sinai Covenant ritual system reveal only a partial representation of Jesus Christ's role as the one great sacrificial offering for the sins of mankind and His subsequent role as our High Priest.

The sacrifices at the tabernacle and temple that foreshadowed Christ's role were the central focus of the Old Covenant's worship system. But, according to the author of Hebrews, the value of those sacrifices was clearly only symbolic. "Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?" So he explains: "But in these sacrifices there is [only] a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (verses 2-4, NRSV).

It is vitally important to notice that the author of Hebrews, again traditionally and most likely Paul, intentionally limits his discussion of changes in the law to its temporary and ceremonial aspects. He never suggests that any law of God that defines righteousness or sin has ceased. To the contrary, Paul writes in Romans 3:20 that it is "through the law we become conscious of sin" (NIV). Sin is defined by God's law (1 John 3:4)—as it always has been and always will be.

The book of Hebrews explains, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:26-27, NIV). Anyone desiring to claim Jesus Christ's sacrifice for forgiveness cannot "deliberately keep on sinning" and be accepted by God.

Regulations mentioned in Hebrews as changed do not include laws that define sin. Rather, the author insists, a day of reckoning and judgment is still very much a part of God's plan for those who refuse to quit sinning. He even classifies those who knowingly and deliberately or willfully choose to continue sinning as enemies of God.

Faith to be obedient

Beginning with Hebrews 10:35-36, the author seeks to strengthen his readers' confidence in doing "the will of God." In chapter 11 he then gives Old Testament examples of people who had the faith to do what God told them to do under difficult circumstances. He presents them as persons whose example we should follow. They obeyed God under great duress. We should do no less.

"Therefore," says the author, "since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses [the obedient servants of God mentioned in the Old Testament], let us throw off . . .the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1, NIV).

The book of Hebrews plainly admonishes faithful Christians to follow the example of God's servants in the Old Testament who, because of their faith, refused to sin at the risk of losing their lives. This faith is having the courage to do what God commands regardless of personal risk and hardship. It is living and active faith to obey God, not a dead or dormant faith without the conviction or courage to do His will.

James explains this very clearly: "But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:18-22, NIV).

Only by having constant access to a living, permanent High Priest is it possible for us to obey God in a manner that pleases Him. Hebrews 4:14-16 recaps this in the following words: "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Grace and Law: Why Are They Inseparable?

The word grace is regularly used by some religious people as if it replaces all need to obey God's law. That conclusion is not only inaccurate, it is also diabolical!

Here is the reason: Without law there would be no need for grace. The word grace, as the Greek word charis is translated in the New Testament, means freely shown "favor"—a gift (it's from charis that we derive the English word charity). In a religious context the word grace is used most often for the gift of forgiveness. It refers to how God extends His favor to repentant sinners by forgiving their former disobedience of His law—their "sins previously committed" (Romans 3:25, NRSV).

This is necessary because "everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4, NIV). If there is no law to break, there is no such thing as sin. And if there is no sin the very idea of grace, as God's forgiveness, has no meaning at all.

God does not just dismiss our sins, our lawless acts. Nor does He simply ignore them. Rather, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3) so "that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).

In other words, it was to make God's favor—His grace—available to all who repent (by turning away from sin) that Jesus "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

Therefore, grace encompasses more than just the forgiveness for past sins. It also includes the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us obey God's laws. Indeed, it refers to all the free and unmerited gifts of God. It includes His help in initially turning us away from sin and leading us to His truth and way of life, His forgiveness of our past sins and ultimately His granting us the greatest gift of all—eternal life in His Kingdom.

But without law, grace would be meaningless because there would be no way to define sin. Yet without grace, forgiveness of sin for breaking God's law could not be made available to us.

So Jesus died and rose again to make grace available to anyone who is eager and willing to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Through grace, we can first be forgiven of our lawbreaking and then enabled by the Holy Spirit to obey God's law from the heart—with the ultimate goal and promise of being able to live for all eternity in perfect obedience.

Thus, law and grace are utterly inseparable. Law is necessary to define sin and its consequences. Grace is necessary so sinners can be forgiven and led to obedience to God through the power of the Holy Spirit and the assistance of Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and High Priest.

A High Priest Eager to Help Us

The key to solving the problem of sin is the help we receive through Jesus Christ. Jesus was born not only to make possible forgiveness of the past, but to help us conquer the strongholds of sin, the entrenched habits that are so difficult to dislodge from our lives. He is our merciful High Priest in heaven (Hebrews 2:17-18; 8:1-2; 9:11-14; 10:19-23), interceding with the Father on our behalf (Romans 8:34).

As John explained, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NRSV).

Jesus is ever ready to help us gain the victory over sin: "And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4-5).

The apostle John, while acknowledging our human weaknesses, encourages us not to give in to sin. "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2, NRSV).

This gives us every reason for encouragement in our daily struggle against sin. After all, Christ has experienced the same temptations and fully understands our plight. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16, NRSV).

How do we get that help? Jesus answers: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8).

Circumcision vs. a 'New Creation' in Christ

"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Galatians 6:15, NIV).

The Jewish practice of requiring gentiles (non-Jews) to be circumcised to be accepted into their fellowship threatened the unity of the early Church. The apostles held a special conference at Jerusalem to address that issue so that the right perspective of justification through faith in and of Christ would not be distorted.

In a letter sent to gentile congregations at the end of that conference, the apostles confirmed in writing that they were all in agreement on this matter. They explained, "We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said" (Acts 15:24, NIV).

Those disturbing the churches in Antioch and other areas tried to convince Christian gentiles that "unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (verse 1, NIV).

The New Testament talks about a circumcision of the heart. But even Moses had long before prophesied: "Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6, NASB).

Paul also confirms this, writing that "he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:29, NASB). Thus, true Jews—true Christians—are those who are circumcised spiritually, with the rebellious spirit of the human mind resisted, suppressed and subdued in obedience to God through His Spirit.

Of those who insisted that believing gentiles should observe the outwardly symbolic aspects of the law, many were motivated by a desire for harmony with the non-Christian Jewish community. But as was covered in chapter 2, those aspects of the law are no longer required. The book of Hebrews explains this thoroughly. But that epistle had not yet been written when the issue of circumcision of gentiles led to a crisis in Galatia.

Paul emphasizes the importance of Christ's death

In addressing this same matter, Paul explained to the Galatians: "As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:12).

In the early New Testament Church, certain false teachers attempted to persuade gentile converts that they could not be justified (have their sins forgiven) by simply repenting, believing the gospel, and accepting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Instead, they were teaching that justification was possible only if they were physically circumcised and adhered to other temporary laws that were given at Mt. Sinai. The apostles rejected this argument categorically. Paul forcefully argued against it in his letter to the Galatians.

The gentile Christians in the province of Galatia were being enticed to accept circumcision so that fellowship barriers between them and the Jews would be dropped. Jews limited their interaction with gentiles to mostly business activities. Eating together at the same table was banned. Even Peter at first hesitated to go against this taboo (Acts 10:25-29).

Whoever was enticing the Galatians argued that circumcision is essential to be fully accepted among God's people (the Jews). Circumcision would have opened the fellowship door for gentiles to the entire Jewish community. It also would have removed much of the tension between the Christians and the nonbelieving Jews.

But trying to resolve that issue with circumcision threatened to create a much greater identity issue. Physical circumcision only identified the Jews as natural descendants of Abraham. God was offering Jews and gentiles alike both justification and salvation as His children through Jesus Christ, not through fleshly circumcision. Protecting their properly perceived identity as the justified children of God was what was at stake.

Therefore, the purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians was to make it clear that becoming adopted descendants of Judah (the great-grandson of Abraham from whom the term Jewis derived) through circumcision offered the gentiles nothing in regard to salvation. Even circumcised Jews had to be justified through the blood of Christ and afterward live a Spirit-led life.

Nevertheless, many of the Christian gentiles in Galatia were impressed (or intimidated by) the circumcision argument. They saw it as a reasonable way to change their ambiguous social identity as neither idolaters nor Jews.

God inspired Paul to see the whole picture very differently. What the Galatian gentiles were being enticed to accept would have changed their entire perception of how important Christ's sacrifice was to them. It would have clouded their understanding that justification is by the grace of God through faith in Christ's shed blood and the faithful obedience that comes through Christ's indwelling by the Holy Spirit.

Paul perceived that this change would have tacitly presented circumcision and diligent obedience to the law as the way to obtain eternal life. It threatened to undercut their faith in Christ as their Savior and Redeemer. It could have obscured the fact that by justification through faith they had already obtained a better identity as the children of God and heirs to the promise made directly to Abraham than they could ever obtain through physical circumcision.

His point was, they did not need to be adopted as Jews to become "sons of God" (Galatians 3:26) and receive eternal life.

Justification is not "through the law"

Paul responded, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then

Christ died for nothing" (Galatians 2:21, NRSV). Perceiving obedience to law through physical means (including the circumcision law) as a way of justification would imply that faith in and of Christ as our Redeemer and Savior is unnecessary or insufficient.

In effect, it would have shifted justification from the realm of mercy and empowerment through faith to the realm of lawful debt—to what could be earned through diligent natural effort in obedience. That would have ignored the fact that Scripture declares that all mankind is "under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Galatians 3:22, KJV).

After having sinned, the most diligent attention to the observance of law—any law—that one could possibly achieve could never earn forgiveness.

The miracle of a "new creation"

We must, as Paul, emphasize that the New Covenant is about circumcising the heart—becoming a "new creation" in Christ. It is the miracle of God writing His law in our hearts and minds through the gift of the Holy Spirit, not through physical circumcision.

So how is the Holy Spirit to be received? That was made clear at the beginning of the Church—on the day the Holy Spirit was first given to the disciples.

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38).

No works of any kind can earn for us the remission of sins or the gift of the Holy Spirit! Though conditioned on repentance and faith, both are nonetheless gifts of mercy as a result of Christ's sacrifice for us.

Therefore, Paul goes straight to the heart of the matter: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh [i.e., circumcision]?" (Galatians 3:1-2, NRSV).

Accepting the need for physical circumcision, and possibly other ceremonial works of law, would have been a tacit denial of the sufficiency of justification through Christ. It would have substituted physical "works of law" for His sacrifice and help.

The law is not the issue

The issue was not whether the law of God is good or bad. It was whether keeping that law can earn forgiveness of sin and eternal life and whether human effort can even meet God's requirements of true obedience. Paul's point was that by "works of the law" one earns nothing in regard to justification. The very idea that one could earn personal forgiveness and salvation is absurd.

The law defines sin and sets the penalty for it. That has never changed. But the law does not and cannot forgive sin. It provides no way to buy back or reclaim innocence after one commits sin.

So Paul explains that, once transgressions have been committed, it is futile to seek forgiveness and justification through the "works of the law"—because "as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'" (Galatians 3:10).

Notice that the curse—the penalty of death—is placed on those who fail to do everything in the law. The law itself is not the curse. The law demands the curse of death for all who are disobedient, not for anyone who has always been obedient—as was Jesus Christ! The curse (death) falls not on someone who keeps the law, but on those who break it (be sure to read "The 'Curse of the Law'").

The spiritual guilt and resultant death penalty for all of humanity was placed on our Savior, Jesus Christ. The sacrifice of Christ allows us to be forgiven of our sins and justified. Forgiveness comes not from any works that we do because He, who alone never sinned, bore that " curse" of death that we have earned with our sins. Unless we repent—quit sinning (John 8:11)—we will perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

We are crucified with Christ

If we repent with faith that Christ died in our place, Paul explains that we are considered "crucified" with Him. "For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:19-20, KJV).

That Jesus Christ had to pay the death penalty the law demands for transgressions shows that God still regards His law as binding. Its conditions had to be met.

Jesus met the law's punitive requirement in our place so that God's grace could be made available to us. Therefore, continues Paul, "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (verse 21, NRSV).

Paul's conclusion is based on these essential truths:

Once the death penalty is incurred, law cannot release those who are guilty from that penalty.

Therefore, Jesus Christ bore the death penalty for our transgressions at His crucifixion.

Once we acknowledge through repentance that we have sinned, if we have faith in Christ's death as lawful payment for the death penalty we deserve and commit to now obeying Him with His help, then God reckons us as having "died to the Law"—and, therefore, reconciled to Him.

For us to be reckoned dead to the law, the law must still be in force. Justification would be meaningless if no law existed to be transgressed.

Only by having our death penalty forgiven may we become "children of God" and "joint heirs with Christ" of the eternal promise made to Abraham (Romans 8:16-17).

Circumcision was merely the physical sign that identified the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh. Though it had symbolic value for the people of Israel, it provides nothing for justification and is of no use in the cancellation of guilt.

Therefore, the attraction that some of the Galatians had for the offer of circumcision to solve their relationship problem with the Jewish community—primarily not to "suffer persecution for the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:12)—was about to threaten their relationship with God.

It was misleading them concerning what is really important to being accepted as His holy people. That acceptance cannot be earned by any "works of the law"—and certainly not by circumcision.

The social context of Galatians 3

Some of Paul's reasoning in the third chapter of Galatians is closely linked to the analogy he constructs in chapter 4.

A minor son of a Roman estate owner was not acknowledged as his heir until the owner officially declared the child's kinship to him later in life. A minor boy's family status was little different from that of a trusted family slave.

The boy was probably treated very well, but legally he had few rights. A custodian (often an adult slave) was set over him as his guide and trainer in self-discipline. His custodian also guarded him as he went to and from the locations where he would receive his more formal schooling.

Paul compares such a minor son's family status to that of a slave (Galatians 4:1). His ultimate status in regard to the family inheritance was to be determined at a later date.

Physically the people of Israel were the sons of Abraham and potential heirs of the promise God gave to him. But their transgressions had put them in a state of bondage to sin. It brought on them the death penalty—invalidating their immediate claim to the eternal inheritance God had promised to Abraham through his righteous Seed, Jesus Christ.

It put them in need of a way to be forgiven—to be justified and remain justified. For a limited period of time—until Christ would come and offer His life for their sins (and for the sins of all people)—they were given a temporary "custodian." This custodian—the rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices—richly typified Christ.

For them or anyone else to inherit eternal life, they must become the "sons of God through faith" (Galatians 3:26). This is done through what the Scriptures refer to as justification—being made right with God through the cleansing of an unjust past and receiving the spiritual help needed to obey from the heart. That is Paul's focus in the book of Galatians.

The temporary law as Israel's custodial guard

When God established the people of Israel as a nation, He did not immediately free them from their bondage to sin. But He did put them under a "custodian" to guard them from totally abandoning hope in the future redemption promised Abraham and his descendants.

Therefore, Paul begins comparing the instructive body of Levitical, ritualistic, ceremonial, sacrificial, temple-based law (which began to be received at Mt. Sinai and which included circumcision) to the promise given to Abraham. That system of law became their custodial guardian in much the same way the custodian described above guarded an estate owner's son.

For example, Hebrews 10:1 speaks of "the law" that is no longer necessary: "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect."

While the general term "the law" is used in this verse, the context clearly shows that the reference is only to the specific category of the sacrificial law.

The major purpose of the book of Galatians is to explain that justification, becoming right with God, does not come by human effort alone. Works of law—any law, whether of man or God—cannot save us. Only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ can forgive sins and justify us. And only Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit can keep us right with God.

The book of Hebrews gives this same explanation: "For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

"And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:13-15).

Sacrifices could only render purification in a physical and communal sense. They could not forgive sins in the spiritual sense of the word. True spiritual redemption and forgiveness of sins comes only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The fact that animal sacrifices are no longer needed has no bearing on the underlying spiritual laws of God, which are still necessary and required.

As Hebrews 8:7-10 states: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord.

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'"

Under the former covenant, God spelled out penalties for disobedience. And He gave them symbolic reminders that they would need a sacrifice (Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of their

sins.

What is included in the "law of God"?

Paul refers to "the whole law" in Galatians 5:3. It was not limited to just the spiritual principles that define sin.

In it are three main categories of laws that were codified for Israel at Sinai. Each category serves different objectives.

First, the law contains the Ten Commandments and many other commands, precepts, statutes and judgments that permanently distinguish righteousness from sin. These laws reflect God's divine nature of outgoing love (compare 2 Peter 1:4; Matthew 22:37-40). The fundamental principles were known by God's servants long before Moses (be sure to read "Did the Ten Commandments Exist Before Moses?" beginning on page 28.)

This category of law was not temporary. It did not originate at Sinai and did not end with Jesus Christ's sacrifice. The laws in this category, including the Ten Commandments and other regulations of daily spiritual life, are "holy and just and good," and Paul said that with his heart he "served" them (Romans 7:12, 14, 25).

Second, "the whole law" contains symbolic regulations pointing to Christ's role in solving humanity's problem with sin. These physical sacrifices, offerings and ceremonies filled a temporary need. And they did it very well! Yet their observance is no longer required. Hebrews 9:9-10 explains this clearly. Jesus became the sacrifice for sin they represented.

Third, the law had regulations that enabled the administration of governance in ancient Israel. Ordinances setting punishments for specific transgressions fall into this category. Such national ordinances—though given to a people not yet having received the Holy Spirit—are still useful as examples of good, sound and godly judgment.

As Paul explained to Timothy, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). Those ancient writings are filled with principles and examples that explain and illustrate righteous behavior. This is one of the reasons Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Luke 4:4).

The reason for the Sinai Covenant

Paul wanted the Galatians to understand a major purpose for the Sinai Covenant, particularly the entire body of temporary law given with it. That purpose was to prepare the people of Israel for genuine repentance and justification through Christ at a later time.

Therefore, many temporary features were given to them through Moses. Those symbolic features served as a "reminder" of guilt and the need for redemption, but they could not "take away sins" (Hebrews 10:1-4).

They kept the Israelites constantly aware of their need for a Redeemer. In the writings of later prophets, God revealed much more information about that future Redeemer.

Those symbolic and temporary aspects of law were necessary for the duration of the time covered by the Sinai Covenant. But with the coming of the Redeemer—who is both the Savior and High Priest of all who are redeemed—they are no longer required. "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well" (Hebrews 7:12, NRSV).

That partial change in the law (not a rejection of the eternal aspect of law itself) included only limited features within the entirety of what was spoken at Sinai.

The New Covenant's primary focus is to provide forgiveness for sin (as foreshadowed in the Sinai Covenant) and to create righteous thinking and will to act accordingly in the inner person. It accomplishes this by writing the same fundamentals of the spiritual and unchanging "law" given to Moses in the heart and mind rather than on merely external objects such as tablets of stone.

It also provides the gift of the Holy Spirit—for "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). The Holy Spirit supplies the internal motivation and drive needed to obey those laws of God that distinguish good from evil (Romans 8:7-9).

Abraham's example of faith

In both covenants, God's law defines sin and contrasts it with righteousness. But law does not and cannot forgive sin. To make this point clear, Paul gives the Galatians a history lesson.

He refers back to the covenant made with Abraham—the foundation on which both the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant are based. That covenant contained the "promise" that Abraham's "Seed" would obey God perfectly so as to qualify in all respects as the Redeemer of "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:7-8, 29).

Since Jesus Christ is that Redeemer, it is only though faith in and of Him—and not merely through attempting on one's own to obey "works of law"—that deliverance from sin's penalty and from sin itself is made possible. Abraham's faith is offered as the prime example we should emulate in this regard.

"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith" (Romans 4:13, NIV). Of course, that faith was coupled with and demonstrated by Abraham's obedience.

Paul is making the point that since "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16, KJV). He continues, "For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (Galatians 3:18).

To grasp all that Paul is saying, we must understand both aspects of justification. In some places Paul's focus is on reconciliation—dealing with "sins that were previously committed"

(Romans 3:25), the emphasis being on the blotting out of transgressions through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ. In other places he focuses on remaining justified through continued obedience—also possible only through Christ.

The law's purpose

Since justification did not come through the legal system given to ancient Israel , Paul asks, "What purpose then does the law [its temporary and "custodial" aspects] serve?" In the same verse he answers: "It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator" (Galatians 3:19).

Without the preexisting, unchanging law of God there could be no transgressions or sins—hence no guilt and no need for forgiveness and justification or a Savior. Therefore, in addition to explaining righteousness, the law of God also defines and condemns transgressions. Because of transgressions of preexisting law, the sacrificial and ceremonial laws were added as merely temporary and disciplinary reminders of sin, as Jeremiah 7:21-23 makes clear.

The promises made to Abraham were spiritual and are the same promises made to the people of God today, to those who have repented and received the Holy Spirit. God's people today, just as righteous Abraham (see Genesis 26:5), must keep the unchanging law of God that defines sin—though it cannot forgive sin.

The sacrificial and priestly aspects of the law symbolized the redemption from guilt that Christ's shed blood would make available in the future. But now, because He has been sacrificed as the true "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), those mere symbolic aspects of law are no longer required.

The law's principles of governance taught the people of Israel to look to God as their supreme Ruler. When Jesus Christ returns, He will again establish these aspects of divine rule, but this time over all the earth as the " King of kings" (Revelation 17:14; 19:19-21). Righteous governance, with many similarities to the administrative system given to ancient Israel, will then be applied to all peoples and nations (Isaiah 2:2-4).

As noted earlier, "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith" (Romans 4:13, NIV)—which includes forgiveness of sins and empowerment to fully obey God. Therefore, since Jesus Christ is our Redeemer and Savior, it is only though the gift of faith that we may receive, from God through Christ, deliverance from sin and its consequences (Ephesians 2:8).

Galatians 3:19: "Added . . . till the Seed should come"

To underscore the importance of Christ's role in redemption, Galatians 3:19 notes that (temporary) law "was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made . . ."

Once Christ came and died for those transgressions, justification by grace through faith became

available to all who believe and repent.

That justification did not become available through circumcision as a reward earned by "works of law." It is available only as a gift—through faith— just as Abraham was justified by faith. The sacrificial, ceremonial aspects of the law given at Sinai were indeed made unnecessary once Christ (the "Seed") had come. But the eternal, spiritual "royal law" of God (James 2:8) continues for Christians today.

Regrettably, many twist Paul's words out of context to contradict statements he himself made.

In Romans 2:13 Paul says emphatically, "Not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified." Justification is not even available to those who refuse to be "doers" of the law—that is, the spiritual and eternal law of God.

An important prerequisite for forgiveness and empowerment through justification is repentance (Acts 2:38), which includes not merely sorrow over past lawbreaking but commitment to obey God's law from that point forward.

Only then may one receive the Holy Spirit that provides the "power and love and self-control" needed to overcome sin (2 Timothy 1:7, New Century Version). The fact that justification is given only to the "doers" of God's spiritual law makes His law essential to that process.

Because no one can earn forgiveness by "works" or "deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28-30) and no one can succeed in full obedience to God on his own, Paul asks, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" His answer: "Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (verse 31).

Even in Galatians 3:21 Paul plainly confirms that the law and the promise don't oppose but support one another: "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law."

The law and the promise each have a role in "bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). But each role is distinct.

The law explains righteousness and condemns sin. And the symbolic aspects of the law looked forward to redemption. But a pardon for sin is available only through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, the promised Redeemer.

To achieve the objective of the New Covenant, God's great spiritual laws must be written in the hearts and minds of those who are pardoned and redeemed so they will have the character to serve Him faithfully for all eternity (Hebrews 10:16).

But before that can happen, the justice of God first has to be satisfied through justification by the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Current Confusion Over Christian Freedom

In countering the Galatian heresy, Paul sometimes refers to Christian freedom. But the freedom he describes is very different from the way his words are commonly interpreted today. Paul's reasoning regarding grace, law, justification and freedom has been so twisted out of context that today his meaning is rarely correctly understood.

For example, the popular view of freedom today, especially in Western society, is that individuals should be free to live as they please. People generally read that concept of freedom into Galatians. But such an idea was totally foreign to Paul—and to the authorities and society of Paul's day.

The government of the Roman Empire was a dictatorship under the authority of the emperor. Relatively few people possessed Roman citizenship with its associated legal rights. Most of the population belonged to two other classes of people: free noncitizens and slaves. From these came the majority of Christian converts. Paul contrasts the free (nonenslaved) people with enslaved people to illustrate an important truth.

Those who are justified by the death of Christ are free from the condemnation to death earned by past sins. Those not justified are not free from that condemnation. As unforgiven sinners they remain like criminals sentenced to death and detained in bondage (as on death row) awaiting execution at the time of God's final judgment.

Paul does appeal to Christians to untangle themselves from—live free from—this world's bigoted class distinctions. He does this because, for the Church, "there is neither Jew nor Greek [gentile], there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

However, he never represents this freedom as a release from the law of God that defines the sins that are so common in the world around us. He does point out that Jesus Christ "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4).

Jesus Christ frees us from the condemnation that we bring on ourselves by participating in the evils of our present society, not from the authority of God's law. Paul made it very clear that God has "condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4).

Paul consistently contrasts sin that reflects the works of the flesh to righteous conduct that reflects the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-23). The reason we need God's Spirit is so we will have the ability to perform what the law teaches. The Holy Spirit opens our minds to understand the true intent of the ways of God. We then must grow in godly character by diligently walking in God's way.

The 'Curse of the Law'

Galatians 3:10-13 is one of the most frequently misused passages in the Bible. In both writing and preaching, scholars and pastors alike turn to this passage to support a badly misguided assumption that Paul viewed God's law as a curse. But how could he view it as a curse since he stated in Romans 7:12 that God's law was holy?

Paul indeed speaks of "the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13), meaning a curse decreed by the law. But he does not refer to the law itself as a curse.

What Paul actually says is this: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (verse 13, NRSV).

A few verses earlier he writes: "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law'" (verse 10, NRSV).

First, notice that the curse applies to "everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law"! No curse is pronounced on those who obey "all the things" the law requires.

Of course, only Jesus Christ has ever obeyed everything in the law, without transgressing any of it. All the rest of us have sinned.

What, then, is "the curse of the law"? And in what way has Christ become a curse for us? What was Paul really saying?

This is easily explained from the law itself. Galatians 3:10 merely paraphrases an Old Testament passage: "Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them" (Deuteronomy 27:26, NASB). The curse is not the law—it is clearly the penalty imposed for not keeping the law.

Galatians 3:13 also is a condensed quote of an Old Testament passage that explains exactly who is cursed and why: "If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance" (Deuteronomy 21:22-23, NIV).

Those "guilty of a capital offense"—deserving the penalty of death—were hung on a tree after being executed to serve as a public example. They were displayed before all as convicted sinners, cursed for their sins.

All human beings are guilty of sin. Therefore, we all deserve to be displayed as convicted and "cursed" sinners.

Jesus Christ, by being crucified and in effect hung on a tree as a condemned criminal, "bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24).

He bore the full curse—the full public disgrace and penalty of death —that we all deserve. This was what Paul meant in Galatians 3:13 when he wrote, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (NRSV).

Galatians 4:9-10: Are God's Laws Bondage?

Some view Galatians 4:9-10 as condemning Old Testament laws. In these verses Paul wrote: "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years."

Those who argue against God's laws see Paul's reference to "days and months and seasons and years" as pointing to the Sabbath, festivals and sabbatical and jubilee years given in the Old Testament (Leviticus 23, 25). They view these God-given observances as the "weak and miserable principles" (NIV) to which the Galatians were "turn[ing] again" and becoming "in bondage" (verse 9).

Is this Paul's meaning?

There is an obvious problem with viewing these verses as being critical of the Sabbath, since the Sabbath is not even mentioned here. The term "Sabbath," "Sabbaths" and any related words do not even appear anywhere in the epistle to the Galatians.

To argue against keeping the Sabbath, some assume that the "years" referred to in Galatians 4:10 are the sabbatical and jubilee years described in Leviticus 25. However, the jubilee year was not being observed anywhere in Paul's day, and the sabbatical year was not being observed in areas outside Palestine (Encyclopaedia Judaica, Vol. 14, p. 582, and Jewish Encyclopedia, p. 666, "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee"). The fact that Galatia was in pagan Asia Minor, far outside the land of Israel, makes it illogical to imagine Paul could have been referring to the sabbatical and jubilee years.

The Greek words Paul used for "days and months and seasons and years" are used throughout the New Testament in describing normal, civil periods of time. They are totally different from the precise terms Paul used in Colossians 2:16 specifying the Sabbaths and festivals of God. He used exact terminology for biblical observances in Colossians, but used very different Greek words in Galatians—a clear indication that he was discussing altogether different subjects.

To understand what Paul meant, we must examine both the historic and immediate contexts of these verses.

The Galatians couldn't "turn again" to days they had never observed

The Galatian churches were composed mostly of members from a gentile, rather than Jewish, background. Paul made it clear that they were physically uncircumcised (Galatians 5:2; 6:12-13), so they could not have been Jewish.

This background is important in understanding this controversial scripture. In Galatians 4:9-10, Paul said that the Galatians were "turn[ing] again to the weak and beggarly elements," which

included "days and months and seasons and years." Since Paul's readers were from a gentile background, it is difficult to see how the "days and months and seasons and years" they were turning back to could be the Sabbath and other biblical festivals, since they could not "turn again" to something they had not previously observed.

This is made even clearer by the immediate context. In verse 8, Paul said, "When you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods." By this Paul referred "clearly to the idols of paganism, which, in typical Jewish idiom, Paul termed 'not gods'" (The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1976, Vol. 10, p. 475).

Not referring to biblical practices

Is it possible that these "weak and beggarly elements" they were returning to (verse 9) could be God's laws, Sabbaths and festivals? The word translated "elements" here is the Greek word stoicheia. What does it mean? The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains:

"It would seem that in Paul's time . . . stoicheia . . . referred to the sun, moon, stars, and planets —all of them associated with gods or goddesses and, because they regulated the progression of the calendar, also associated with the great pagan festivals honoring the gods. In Paul's view these gods were demons. Hence, he would be thinking of a demonic bondage in which the Galatians had indeed been held prior to the proclamation of the gospel . . .

"In the verses that follow, Paul goes on to speak of these three crucial subjects in quick succession: (1) 'those who by nature are not gods,' presumably false gods or demons; (2) 'those weak and miserable principles,' again stoicheia; and (3) 'days and months and seasons and years' (vv. 9, 10). No doubt Paul would think of these demons in ways entirely different from the former thinking of the Galatians . . . Thus, this whole issue takes on a cosmic and spiritual significance. The ultimate contrast to freedom in Christ is bondage to Satan and the evil spirits" (p. 472).

Superstitious observance of days and times

This is the context in which at least some of the Galatians were observing special "days and months and seasons and years." The word translated here as "observe" or "observing" is the Greek word paratereo, meaning "to watch closely, [or] observe narrowly" (W.E. Vine, Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "Observation, Observe").

This word "seems to have the sense of 'anxious, scrupulous, well-informed observance in one's interest,' which . . . fit[s] regard for points or spans of time which are evaluated positively or negatively from the standpoint of the calendar or astrology" (Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 1995, Vol. 8, p. 148).

Whatever "days and months and seasons and years" the Galatians were observing, they were apparently observing them in a superstitious manner, as they had observed days and times before their conversion.

From the context, we see it is simply not logical to conclude that Paul was criticizing the observance of the biblical Sabbath and festivals, since they were not even mentioned anywhere in this epistle. Instead, he was attacking misguided efforts to attain salvation through unnecessary superstitious observances.

Paul tells them, "I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain" (verse 11). He was trying to prevent them from again becoming entangled in their former pagan practices.

Did Paul's Words to the Galatians Contradict His Actions?

One common interpretation of the book of Galatians is that Paul criticized the Galatians for keeping the biblical Sabbath and Holy Days. Many theologians believe these were the days to which Paul referred when he wrote: "How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years" (Galatians 4:9-10).

Is Paul criticizing observing the Sabbath and Holy Days here? The book of Acts provides important facts showing this clearly wasn't the case.

Paul visited several cities within the Roman province of Galatia (in what is today central Turkey) during his first journey around A.D. 46-48. He wrote his epistle to the Galatians at some point after that journey.

But notice what Luke records in Acts 13 concerning Paul's actions during his actual visit to Antioch in Pisidia, a region in the province of Galatia:

• Paul participates in Sabbath services at the local synagogue (verse 14).

• Paul, as a guest and scholar, teaches in the synagogue (verses 15-41).

• At the conclusion of the service, "the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath" (verse 42).

• When that next Sabbath arrived, "almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God" from Paul and Barnabas (verse 44).

If one assumes that Galatians 4:9-10 condemns Sabbath-keeping, an obvious question is, why would Paul teach gentiles and Jews on the Sabbath while visiting the Galatian churches and then, after departing, write a letter reprimanding them for observing the Sabbath day?

We should also ask, if Paul believed keeping the Sabbath and biblical Holy Days was "bondage," why didn't he take the opportunity to tell these Sabbath-keeping Jews and gentiles this when he had such a perfect opportunity?

When they "begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath," why didn't Paul simply tell them he would teach them the very next day—Sunday—or any other day? Instead, "almost the whole city came together" a week later to hear Paul and Barnabas—on the Sabbath day!

If in Galatians 4:9-10 Paul was attempting to condemn Sabbath-keeping as bondage, his actions as recorded in the book of Acts show that he was either very confused or very hypocritical. On the other hand, if we really understand the true intent of Paul's words (see "Galatians 4:9-10: Are God's Laws Bondage?"), both his actions and words are consistent and make perfect sense.

Why Paul Used the Term 'the Whole Law' in Galatians 5:3

When the apostle Paul said, "And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law" (Galatians 5:3), was he implying that the gentiles' exemption from physical circumcision also exempted them from having to obey any of the laws of God?

That is what is commonly taught concerning this passage. But that is not what Paul meant! The laws of the Sinai Covenant varied greatly in their purpose and content. Some laws defined sin—spelled out transgressions. These laws, though included as part of the Sinai Covenant, neither commenced at Sinai nor ended at Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

Other laws included as part of the Sinai Covenant established administrative procedures and penalties for disobedience. They were necessary for the governing of the nation of Israel.

Still others—such as circumcision and sacrifices—had a symbolic purpose. The book of Hebrews explains that, for the most part, those types of laws had only a temporary purpose because they were "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation" (Hebrews 9:9-10). But Hebrews does not say that everything contained in "the whole law" was temporary.

Paul's point in Galatians about being "a debtor to keep the whole law" is expressed in the context of those who wanted to impose circumcision on the Galatians. Their reasoning implied, maybe even unintentionally, that at least some of the symbolic aspects of the law would be required of the gentiles. That is the false teaching against which Paul forcefully argues in his epistle to the Galatians.

Because of His perfect obedience, Jesus Christ was qualified to lay down His own life so as to free from enslavement to sin and its death penalty all who have faith in Him. So Paul reasons with the Galatians: "And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross [the preaching that Jesus Christ is our sacrifice for sin] has ceased" (Galatians 5:11).

His point is that demanding that the symbolic ritual of circumcision be required is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and work. He rejected that argument—but he did not reject the whole law.

God's commandments that define sin are written in "the law"—but they don't make up the whole law. Paul used the term "the whole law" to make it clear that the law has within it symbolic aspects that should not be required of the gentiles.

Paul expresses clearly, in a letter to the Corinthians, this distinction in what the gentiles should keep from what was not necessary: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters" (1 Corinthians 7:19).

What's Wrong With Our Human Nature?

The Bible represents Satan as the master manipulator of human nature. Our weakness combined with the devil's influence has led the whole world into sin (Revelation 12:9). Paul explains that "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:4, NIV).

Paul reminds Christ's faithful disciples that "you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (Ephesians 2:2-3).

Because of Satan's deceptions and the sinful tendencies of human nature, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We must understand, however, that the devil cannot force us to sin. He simply influences us through our fleshly weaknesses. But several major areas of our fleshly nature are easily manipulated by Satan.

First, our selfish, fleshly desires often get us into trouble: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21, NRSV).

Paul graphically describes the effect fleshly desires have on human behavior. "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another . . .

"Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

"Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

"They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (Romans 1:24-32, NIV).

Second, our natural deviousness, including self- deception, is a major weakness of the fleshly mind. "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the L ord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings" (Jeremiah 17:9-10, NRSV).

We naturally look for ways to justify our lusts, our sinful desires, and the behavior that arises from them. We deceive ourselves into believing that, since our desires are natural, they are not so bad after all. But God's Word reminds us that "there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). Death is the end result of living that wrong way (Romans 6:23).

Third, we have a natural tendency to resent having our fleshly desires limited by rules, even God's rules. Paul explains: "For those whose lives are according to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those whose lives are according to the Spirit, about the things of the Spirit. For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law, for it is unable to do so. Those whose lives are in [that is, dominated by] the flesh are unable to please God" (Romans 8:5-8, Holman Christian Standard Bible).

These and other fleshly weaknesses are what we call human nature. Satan takes advantage of our weak and greedy nature by persuading us to rely even more on our emotions, needs and wants than we normally would. But we play our part. Without the positive influence of God's Spirit, we are simply not inclined to live according to God's instructions.

Therefore, Paul warns: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14).

The Holy Spirit: God's Promise of His Divine Help

A cornerstone of the New Covenant is God's promise to "put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). In Ezekiel 36:26-27 He tells us how He will accomplish this: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (NIV).

We need God's help, through His Spirit, to obey Him from the heart and bring our thoughts, attitudes and actions in line with His. We must allow His Spirit to become the guiding force in our lives so that we might have this "new heart."

To grasp how God's Spirit works within us, we must understand what God's Spirit is.

Divine help through God's Spirit

How does God's Spirit lead us? Let's consider a few ways.

The Holy Spirit keeps us in contact with God's mind. God's Spirit works with our mind. The apostle John describes it this way: "Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit [which] He has given us" (1 John 3:24). Through God's Spirit, which He gives us, we can be influenced by God for the good. This is in stark contrast to the world around us and our own nature, which influence us toward evil.

God's Spirit also helps us come to a deeper comprehension of His truth. When Jesus promised the apostles He would send the Spirit to them, He said it would "guide [them] into all truth" (John 16:13).

God's Spirit inspires a deeper understanding of His Word, purpose and will. As 1 Corinthians 2:9-11 tells us: "But as it is written, 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except [by] the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except [by] the Spirit of God."

Without God's Spirit a person cannot fully understand God's Word and will, "for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (verse 14).

The Holy Spirit makes overcoming possible. Nothing that God asks of us is too difficult to achieve with His power working in our lives. Romans 8:26 tells us that God's Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. Paul speaks for all of us when he said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Jesus promises Christians, "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27). The Christian life is to be one of overcoming. God doesn't want us to remain just as we were when He called us. Instead, He tells us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2). Christianity is a lifetime of overcoming and growing—of transforming our thoughts and mind to become like Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5).

The Spirit of God convicts our conscience and helps us see sin as it really is. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, which would be given to His followers after His death, Jesus said it would "convict the world of sin" (John 16:8). God's Spirit within us, working with our conscience, helps us to recognize and avoid sin.

The Holy Spirit produces godly fruit in us. Just as an apple tree produces apples, God's Spirit produces a particular type of fruit in our lives. Paul lists aspects of the fruit that should be evident in those who are led by God's Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV).

The Spirit of God also comforts, encourages and otherwise helps us. Jesus Christ promised to send His followers a "Helper" (John 14:16) or "Comforter" (KJV). True reassurance and strength come from God's Spirit dwelling in us. We need not be unduly worried about what may happen to us. God's Spirit gives us the assurance that whatever happens will work for the good "to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Growing to spiritual maturity

Correctly understanding the scriptural truth that the Holy Spirit is God's power that can transform our lives helps us better understand His purpose and will for us.

It is also a key to understanding the whole purpose and intent of the New Covenant. God did not establish the New Covenant to abolish His laws, which are holy, just and good (Romans 7:12). He established it to remedy the flaw that was in the people (Hebrews 8:8)—the weakness, disobedience and lack of faith inherent in all of us that leads us to sin (Romans 3:10-18). Through His Spirit, God empowers us to develop holy, righteous character and resist temptation and the pulls to sin.

With God's Spirit at work within us, God's wonderful promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33-34 can be fulfilled: "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

The Justice and Judgment of God

"But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? . . . By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" (Romans 3:5-6, NRSV).

That God is a judge who holds every human being accountable to His law is a theme repeated again and again in the Scriptures. The apostle Paul elaborates on this theme in his letter to the Romans.

To be sure that we rightly understand Paul's reasoning, we need to remember Peter's caution not to misread Paul's words so as to make him seem to say something different from what he means. As Peter noted, in Paul's letters we at times find "some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

Too often such people read into Paul's words their own beliefs and ideas that are completely contrary to God's Word and even Paul's clear teaching. So it's crucial that we carefully read what Paul actually says instead of assuming that popular opinion is always right.

Many popular beliefs about what Paul taught are so biased against the Old Testament writings that they completely miss the point of Paul's letters.

As with his letter to the Galatians, Paul's letter to the Romans is misinterpreted regularly by commentators on the Bible. Because of their preconceived ideas against God's law, they misinterpret the words of Paul so as to make them seem hostile to the laws taught in God's Word.

A major purpose for Paul's writing to the Romans was to put an end to the problem of Christian gentiles and Jews judging one another. He wanted them to see that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" and will all be judged by the same standard (Romans 14:10; John 5:22-24).

God's justice knows no favorites

To make his point plain, Paul explains God's justice and how it relates to the justification of sinners, regardless of their race, culture or previous understanding of His law.

"For God does not show favoritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Romans 2:11-13, NIV).

In the final judgment, every person's eternal destiny hinges on whether his disobedience to God's law is forgiven because of his personal repentance and his genuine faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior and Redeemer. All who refuse to meet those conditions will be judged as unrepentant sinners and condemned.

In Rome some of the gentile converts (possibly only a few of the total number) were judging the Jews. Likewise, some of the Jews were judging gentile converts.

Paul wanted them to understand that, when it comes to judgment, God has no favorites. All are guilty of sin. All must repent of sin—of breaking God's law—and be justified by Christ's blood to receive forgiveness. There is no other path to gaining God's favor.

So Paul explains: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

"Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?" (Romans 2:1-4, NIV).

Two things stand out in these remarks. First, God requires repentance of everyone who seeks forgiveness. Second, He still judges everyone by "truth."

Since God also judges all men without favoritism, ignorance of the law does not excuse anyone from the condemnation the law imposes for sin. Even those who have sinned in ignorance will perish (verse 12) if they refuse to learn the truth, if they are unwilling to quit transgressing the law.

Only sinners who repent by showing a willingness to be "doers of the law" (verse 13) may be justified by God's grace. This applies to Jews and gentiles alike, without favoritism being shown to either.

To emphasize this point, Paul in the first part of the book of Romans covers three crucial aspects of how sin relates to God's justice: (1) sin is universal and all peoples are guilty, (2) sin is caused primarily by fleshly weaknesses (see James 1:14-15) and (3) sin's consequence—when viewed from the point of view of the final judgment—is eternal death.

Why most Jews did not accept Jesus

By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, most Jews were refusing to accept Jesus as the Messiah. His first coming was not that of the conquering king they had expected. This made Him a "stumbling block" to them (Romans 11:9).

Therefore Paul is putting in place the needed background to God's justice so he can address effectively, in chapters 9 through 11, one of the questions that originally prompted this letter. That question was, "Has God cast away His people?" His answer: "Certainly not!" (Romans 11:1).

Paul makes it plain that God has not permanently rejected the Israelites, including the Jews of that time, because they had rejected the Messiah. Nor has God abandoned any of the promises that He had made to them.

Rather, He is calling in this present age only "a remnant" of Israel as His "elect"—with the remainder staying spiritually blinded (verses 5, 7). That blindness of "the rest" will not end until Christ returns.

Therefore that blindness is temporary—only a "blindness in part . . . until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (verse 25). What that means is that during this present age only a small portion of the people of Israel is now being called to repentance.

Israel's future salvation

So Paul then quickly points out that in the future "all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer [Jesus Christ] will come out of Zion, and He will [at His second coming] turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins'" (verses 26-27).

God has a time frame for leading all people to repentance and salvation. Only a relative few are being called in this present age.

Those few, chosen from all nations, will be resurrected from the dead when Christ returns to assist Him in teaching "the rest" of those who are still blinded. "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). God has set aside this millennial period plus the period described in Revelation 20:11-13 to bring the majority of "the rest" of humanity to repentance.

At that time this prophecy of Isaiah about the city of Jerusalem will become a reality: "And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed" (Isaiah 1:26-28, NRSV)

Why was understanding this so important at the time Paul was writing his letter to the church in Rome? It was because an anti- Jewish attitude, which at that time was affecting the Christian gentiles in Rome but later spread to the whole world, needed to be confronted.

Paul wanted to defeat the very idea that God was rejecting His people Israel. He addressed this issue when he wrote the book of Romans. But after his death it emerged again and is known today as "replacement theology." It is the popular notion that God has been replacing the Jews, as His covenant people, with gentile converts.

Gentiles must be "grafted" into Abraham's family

Therefore Paul strongly rejected the idea that God is replacing the nation of Israel—including the Jews of the first century—as His covenant people. Rather, gentile converts are "grafted" into the root of Israel (Romans 11:17-19). The "root" or ancestor of Israel was Abraham, to whom God made the promise that the Messiah would come from his descendants.

The hope of the gentiles, therefore, lies in sharing the heritage promised to the Israelites, not in replacing them or receiving a different heritage apart from them. As Paul had explained to the Christians of Galatia: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

As was explained above, a major factor in Paul's reasoning is that during "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4), God is not calling the majority of either Jews or gentiles to repentance. So he argues that the gentile converts should not assume that their calling means that God has "cast away" the physical descendants of Israel (whether living, deceased or to be born in the future).

Most human beings, Jews and gentiles alike, will be called to repentance—for the purpose of receiving salvation—only after Christ returns. In fact, many of them will wait in their graves, with no consciousness of the passing of time, until the resurrection from the dead that Ezekiel prophesied (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

Revelation 20:5 confirms that resurrection in the New Testament and explains that it will take place after the first thousand years of Jesus Christ's reign on earth is ended. The ultimate and greatest fulfillment of the New Covenant prophesied in Ezekiel and other places will take place after the return of Christ.

This future resurrection is one of the reasons Paul instructs the Christian gentiles not to "boast" as if they were replacing the Israelites in God's salvation plan (Romans 11:18). He wanted them to see why they, like the broken-off natural branches of Israel, should humbly see themselves as mercifully "grafted" into the "olive tree" of Abraham's heirs (verses 13-25). They had no cause for boasting.

Paul also emphasizes that all past promises made to Israel will be fulfilled because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (verse 29). God never breaks His promises.

When Jesus Christ returns, the natural descendants of Israel will submit to His rule (Jeremiah 23:3-6). At that time God will confirm the New Covenant with them as a nation, as His chosen people whom He has not rejected (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Also at that time, God will write His laws in their hearts and minds (verse 33), transforming them into His chosen nation of spiritually capable teachers. As a converted nation, they will be able to help Jesus Christ teach all the nations of the world how to put into practice the ways of God, including His law (Isaiah 2:3; Zechariah 8:22-23). Every promise made to Israel will be fulfilled.

The rejection of Jews after Paul's death

Why was confirming God's faithfulness to the promises He made to Israel so important that Paul wanted all gentile converts to understand it?

History gives us the answer. Within less than a century following his death, the division that Paul had attempted to prevent between Jews and gentiles in Christianity began to take place on a massive scale.

The bulk of gentile converts—by then most were "Christians" in name only—rejected the role of Israel in God's salvation plan and abandoned the law of God. They chose to regard themselves

as the replacements of the Jews. Once that false concept became embedded in their beliefs, they became easy targets for other deceptions.

Most of those deceptions still influence the major branches of Christianity until this day.

This transition marked the beginning of a new theological viewpoint that not only rejected the Jews but also became critical of almost everything that was perceived to be "Jewish"—including the Scriptures that we call the Old Testament. (For more on how this "replacement theology" affected Christianity after Paul's death, be sure to read "The Corruption of Apostolic Christianity".)

The distortion of justification through Christ

It now should be easier to understand Paul's reason for addressing the judging problem among Christians in Rome. If they failed to correctly understand the reason for their calling, Paul knew they would soon be headed for disaster.

So he explains, "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Romans 2:1, NRSV). Each group's eligibility for justification was on the same basis—through Jesus Christ (verse 26), not because one group was superior to the other.

In Romans 4, Paul refers to the example of Abraham, whose faith moved him to obey God (Hebrews 11:8). His purpose is to help the gentile converts to realize that obeying God's commandments is an essential part of repentance.

Paul agrees with James that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17, NIV). So Paul explains how Abraham's faith should be viewed as the basis of his obedience, rather than his obedience being the basis of his faith (Romans 4:13; compare James 2:18-24). Abraham understood clearly that He needed help just to be able to obey God. He did not obey God to receive faith, rather God gave Abraham faith so he could and would obey Him.

Abraham's natural descendants through his grandson Jacob, however, did not follow his example of obedient faith. By the time of Paul, their confidence was based mostly on an inaccurate perception of their superior righteousness.

As a result, most Jews were unable to see their desperate need for justification through Christ. They were anticipating a King who would expel the Roman army and exalt them to the prominence they thought they deserved, not a Savior who could take away their sins.

So Paul explains, in Romans 5:1-17, the benefits of being justified though faith. Those benefits include "peace with God" (verse 1), direct access to Him by faith (verse 2) and the "gift of righteousness"—made possible through a pardon for past guilt and the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 17).

Without those gracious benefits, no one can please God. So repentance, forgiveness of sins through Christ's shed blood and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit are the essentials for becoming a righteous people.

Or, as Paul explained, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

The right response to God's mercy

Becoming a new person, transformed by the power of God's Spirit, is the objective Paul wanted to make the main focus of the Christians in Rome. He was trying to get them to fully comprehend that this walk in "newness of life" is accomplished by obeying God from the heart.

Only those who are forgiven on repentance and led by the Holy Spirit into the obedient way of life revealed in God's spiritual laws and teachings will succeed in that spiritual walk. So Paul continues: "Do you not know that to whom you yield yourselves as slaves for obedience, you are slaves to him whom you obey; whether it is of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness"(verse 16, Modern King James Version).

Then, as a result of "having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (verses 22-23).

Paul begins Romans 7 with the example of a married woman's release from any lawful claim to her by her husband once he is dead. His death releases her from that marriage. By comparison, he explains that "you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ . . ." (verse 4).

Notice that Paul does not say that the law is dead. Rather, we become dead to the law on repentance. That is, the law's claim on our life as the penalty for breaking it is considered met through Jesus Christ's sacrificial death in our place.

Paul's point is that, like the woman released from the specific law binding her to her former husband, we through Jesus' death may be released from the law's specific requirement of death for past sins. As a response, "we should bear fruit to God," in contrast to bearing "fruit to death" (Romans 7:4-5).

This release is only from the condemnation to death that the law imposes on all sinners. It is not a release from any obligation to respect and practice the righteous way of life defined by the law.

Paul summarizes it this way: "But now we have been delivered from the law [from its condemnation to death], having died to what we were held by [condemnation for having sinned], so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter [of the law, as if we were still under its legal condemnation]" (verse 6).

His point is that the right approach to obeying God after we are forgiven is to exceed the mere letter of the law (compare Matthew 5:20). We should obey it according to its intent (or spirit), not by doing only the bare minimum of what is explicitly stated. It serves us as our guide for attaining truly righteous thinking and behavior.

Bringing our fleshly weakness under control

Once he establishes that we are to walk in newness of life by resisting the temptation to sin, Paul begins to address how we can overpower the weaknesses of our fleshly nature, with its evil desires, though the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the remainder of Romans 7 Paul uses himself as an example, describing his own battle with the same fleshly desires and impulses that can tempt us to sin. He contrasts his high regard for God's law with the pulls toward evil he has had to struggle against in his own flesh.

"So then, the law in itself is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good. Are we therefore to say that this good thing caused my death? Of course not! It was sin that killed me, and thereby sin exposed its true character: it used a good thing [the law] to bring about my death, and so, through the commandment, sin became more sinful than ever. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am not: I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (verses 12-14, REB).

This weakness within all of us, not a weakness in God's law, is the problem that both Jews and gentiles have to acknowledge, combat and solve with the help of God's Spirit. It is a personal battle that can be won only with the help of God's Spirit.

Notice how plainly Paul explains this: "I discover this principle, then: that when I want to do right, only wrong is within my reach. In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive in my outward actions a different law [the powerful pulls of the flesh], fighting against the law that my mind approves, and making me a prisoner under the law [the constant pull] of sin which [without the power of God's Spirit] controls my conduct" (verses 21-23, REB).

Rescued from our sinful nature

He then asks, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (verse 24, NRSV). Then he answers his own question, "Thanks be to God [that rescue will come] through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (verse 25, NRSV). Good intentions are not enough to conquer the selfish pulls of our flesh without the assistance supplied by Jesus Christ, our High Priest (verse 25, last part).

So Paul continues: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law [the constant presence] of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

The "law of sin and death" isn't God's law. Here Paul uses the Greek word for "law" in the sense of a dominating power or influence to contrast the struggle between our fleshly nature and God's law and Spirit as to which side will exercise control over our behavior. Paul's point is that we must receive spiritual power from God to rule over our human weaknesses:

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (verses 3-4).

God's Spirit enables us to choose and do what His law requires. With that divine help to overcome our natural, fleshly weaknesses, "the righteous requirement of the law" can now "be fulfilled in us" (verse 4).

"Freedom" to Paul was freedom from the domination of man's fleshly nature and freedom from the condemnation to death by forgiveness of sin. He deeply believed God's promise, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:27, NIV).

In his concluding remarks to the Christians in Rome, he notes and praises their obedience: "For your obedience has become known to all" (Romans 16:19). To him it is " obedience to the faith" which "by the prophetic Scriptures" has been "made known to all nations" (verse 26).

Throughout his letter to the Romans, Paul never wavers in teaching that faith produces obedience to God's Word. The main thrust of his message is always that "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8, NASB).

He wanted the Romans to understand that only a "new heart"—which is the core of the New Covenant—can enable one to obey God from the heart!

How Paul Put the Law on 'Firmer Footing'

A comment by Paul that many lift out of context and misinterpret is Romans 3:28: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."

What did he mean by "apart from the deeds of the law?" Was he saying that one who follows a pattern of life that is apart from—or contrary to—the teachings of the law is pleasing to God?

Let's carefully follow his reasoning. Only a few verses later he asks and answers a crucial question: "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (verse 31).

The New Revised Standard Version renders Paul's powerful words: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." The New English Bible translates Paul's meaning even more clearly: "Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: we are placing law itself on a firmer footing."

Biblical scholar Dr. Brad Young explains: "The words 'place on a firmer footing' is a far better translation of the meaning of the words in Greek. The Greek term histemi, 'stand' or 'place on a firmer footing' is the equivalent of the Hebrew word kiyem, 'cause to stand' or 'make to stand through proper interpretation.' Paul desired to place Torah [the law] on a firmer footing through faith" (Paul the Jewish Theologian, 1997, p. 97).

Paul is in complete agreement with how the Bible defines sin—that sin is disobedience to God's law (1 John 3:4). He explains that "by the law is the knowledge of sin"—it tells us what sin is (Romans 3:20). He summarizes the matter in these words: "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12). This shows that the law is still valid.

The validity of the law, however, does not take care of the problem that people will not obey it. God lamented of ancient Israel, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29). Yet under the New Covenant, a new mind and heart (that comes through the indwelling faith of Christ through the Holy Spirit) makes true obedience possible (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13; Galatians 2:20).

How Does Justification Relate to Salvation?

In understanding the relationship between justification and salvation, we need to realize the different senses in which these terms are used.

Let's start with the meaning of salvation. Perhaps someone has asked you, "Are you saved?" This should actually raise another question: Saved from what?

Paul in the book of Romans explains the dire predicament we human beings are in. He first tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And then: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Salvation (divine deliverance or rescue), then, is from sin and its consequences, the ultimate consequence being death—perpetual, eternal death, as other passages show. The rest of Romans 6:23 states the outcome of salvation: ". . . but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Salvation accomplished in stages

God's salvation is accomplished in stages. Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins. When in repentance (which includes a commitment to obey God) and faith we accept Christ's atoning sacrifice, we are freed from the death penalty. We are then under grace—no longer under the dominion of sin and death (verse 14).

As long as we continue with God—not turning away from His way of life—we are saved. This is the sense of salvation described in Ephesians 2: "By grace you have been saved" (verses 5, 8).

Christians, however, still stumble and sin (1 John 1:8). And every sin is a very serious matter—requiring renewed repentance. In fact, neglecting to repent over an extended period can eventually lead to rejecting God and losing salvation (Hebrews 2:3; 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

Thus each occasion of seeking and receiving God's forgiveness is essentially a renewed salvation— salvation from rejecting God and the terrible end that would lead to. So not only have we "been saved" in one sense, but followers of Christ are presently "being saved" in an ongoing process (see Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15).

As an aside here, this process of ongoing repentance and restoration to God is part of what Scripture refers to as "sanctification"—being made holy or set apart to God. Hebrews 10:10 says that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Yet verse 14 says, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." Having been sanctified is parallel to having been saved at initial repentance and forgiveness—and being sanctified is parallel to being saved in an ongoing process of repentance and change.

The main focus of salvation, though, is the ultimate outcome of eternal life in God's Kingdom.

And this reward comes only after a concerted effort of struggling to overcome.

Jesus spoke of this overarching aspect of salvation in these terms: "He who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:13). The salvation mentioned here is yet future (see also Acts 15:11; Romans 5:9-10). And the salvation process we experience today is pointless for us if it does not lead to this ultimate future salvation.

The meaning of justification

Integral to salvation is the matter of justification. This term refers to being made just, right or righteous. Literally, it means being made straight—perfectly lined up (with God).

We are initially justified or aligned with God when, on repentance and faith in Christ's shed blood for atonement, we are forgiven of sin and reckoned by God as righteous. This is referred to by Paul as "imputed" righteousness (see Romans 4:20-25). Justification in this sense is also known as reconciliation. It corresponds to the past sense of salvation—in which we have been saved from sin and death as long as we continue in God's way.

Yet as already noted, Christians will not maintain perfect obedience. They still sin. Thus, they need help to remain aligned with God (to remain justified) and, when they fall out of alignment through sin, they need to continually be realigned (justified or reconciled).

The apostle James explains that "a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24). He was speaking of maintaining justification through deeds. Yet as Paul explained, human effort of itself cannot achieve the obedience God requires. Only through Christ living within us through the Holy Spirit can we succeed in obedience and remain justified (compare Galatians 2:20; Romans 7:7-8:11).

And thankfully, whenever we fall out of alignment through sin, we still have Christ's blood to justify us as we strive to overcome. Ongoing justification—through Christ-empowered obedience and Christ's atoning sacrifice when we fall short—corresponds to the current process of "being saved."

This will lead us to ultimate salvation. To conclude, let's notice in Romans 5:1-11 past justification through Christ's sacrifice contrasted with future salvation through Christ's life within us to help perfect us in obedience.

Here Paul writes: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God [i.e., reconciliation] through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand [having been saved, in a sense], and rejoice in the hope of the glory of God [yet future].

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations [present struggles], knowing that tribulation produces perseverance [in faith and obedience]; and perseverance, character [the habit of obedience]; and character, hope [in future salvation]. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God [which 1 John 5:3 defines as obedience to God's commandments] has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [that] was given to us.

"For when we were still without strength [incapable of proper obedience], in due time Christ died

for the ungodly . . . God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath [punishment for sin, ultimately death] through Him.

"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life [within us to help us grow in obedience and through His acting as our High Priest]. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."

Does Romans 14 Abolish Laws on Unclean Meats?

Many believe Romans 14 says that Christians are free from all former restrictions regarding the meats they may eat. They cite as proof verse 14, in which Paul wrote, "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

This approach, however, fails to consider the context of Paul's letter as well as the specific Greek words he used.

Many Bible resources agree that Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians around A.D. 55 and that he wrote his epistle to the Romans from Corinth in 56 or 57. The food controversy in Corinth (reflected in chapters 8 and 10) was over meat sacrificed to idols.

Since Paul was writing to the Romans from Corinth, where this had been a significant issue, the subject was fresh on Paul's mind and is the logical, biblically supported basis for his comments in Romans 14.

Understanding Paul's intent

Those who assume the subject of Romans 14 is a retraction of God's law regarding clean and unclean animals must force this interpretation into the text because it has no biblical foundation. The chapter itself shows that the discussion concerned meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 2 contrasts the person who "eats only vegetables" with the one who believes "he may eat all things"— meat as well as vegetables. Verse 6 discusses eating vs. not eating and is variously interpreted as referring to fasting (not eating or drinking), vegetarianism (consuming only vegetables) or eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 21 shows that meat offered to idols was the underlying issue of this chapter: "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak." The Romans of the day commonly offered both meat and wine to idols, with portions of the offerings later sold in the marketplace.

The Life Application Bible comments on verse 2: "The ancient system of sacrifice was at the center of the religious, social, and domestic life of the Roman world. After a sacrifice was presented to a god in a pagan temple, only part of it was burned. The remainder was often sent to the market to be sold. Thus a Christian might easily—even unknowingly—buy such meat in the marketplace or eat it at the home of a friend.

"Should a Christian question the source of his meat? Some thought there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been offered to idols because idols were worthless and phony. Others carefully checked the source of their meat or gave up meat altogether, in order to avoid a guilty conscience."

Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 8 that the main concern for a Christian is to not defile his own conscience or the conscience of other Christians. Jewish Christians especially might have been inclined to feel contaminated by anything related to idolatry. But because an idol cannot, by itself, render anything pure or defiled, a person's conscience, not the idol, is the real issue.

So what is the point of Paul's instruction about eating or not eating in Romans 14? Depending on their consciences, early believers had several choices. Those wishing to be sure of avoiding meat sacrificed to idols could choose to eat only vegetables or fast—avoid food altogether—when faced with the prospect of consuming foods of suspicious background.

For those whose consciences were not troubled by eating meat purchased in local markets just because it might have been ceremonially offered to idols, that option was open to them with one important restriction. They were (especially at group meals where offenses were more likely to occur) to consider first the conscience of others who were present, to be careful to give no offense.

Within this context, said Paul, "let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (verse 5) because "whatever is not from faith is sin" (verse 23).

Greek words clarify Paul's meaning

An understanding of the Greek words Paul used can also help us understand Paul's meaning.

The New Testament writers referred to two concepts of unclean, using different Greek words to convey the two meanings. Unclean could refer to animals God did not intend to be consumed as food (listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). Unclean could also refer to ceremonial uncleanness.

In Romans 14 Paul uses the word koinos, which means "common" (W.E. Vine, Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "Unclean," p. 649). In addition to the meanings of "common" and "ordinary" (see Acts 2:44; 4:32; Titus 1:4; Hebrews 10:29), the word also applied to things considered polluted or defiled. This word, along with its verb form koinoo, is used in Mark 7:2, 15-23, where it obviously refers to ceremonial uncleanness.

Koinos and koinoo appear throughout the New Testament to refer to this kind of ceremonial uncleanness. Something could be "common"—ceremonially unclean—even though it was otherwise considered a scripturally clean meat.

An entirely different word, akathartos, is used in the New Testament for those animals Scripture specifies as unclean. Both words, koinos and akathartos, are used in Acts 10, where Peter distinguished between the two concepts of uncleanness by using both words in verse 14.

When Paul said in Romans 14:14 that "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean [koinos, or 'common'] of itself," he was making the same point he had made earlier to the Corinthians: Just because meat that was otherwise lawful to eat may have been associated with idol worship does not mean it is no longer fit for human consumption. As seen from the context, Paul wasn't discussing biblical dietary restrictions at all.

Paul goes on to state in Romans 14:20 that "all food is clean" (NIV). The word translated "clean"

is katharos, meaning "free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless" (Vine, "Clean, Cleanness, Cleanse, Cleansing," p. 103).

"Clean" meats as such aren't addressed in the New Testament, so there isn't a specific word to describe them. Katharos is used to describe all kinds of cleanliness and purity, including clean dishes (Matthew 23:26), people (John 13:10) and clothing (Revelation 15:6; 19:8, 14), "pure" religion (James 1:27), gold and glass (Revelation 21:18).

Realize also that, in both verses 14 and 20 of Romans 14, the word food or meat doesn't appear in the original Greek, but was inserted by later translators. No specific object is mentioned relative to cleanness or uncleanness. The sense of these verses is merely that "nothing [is] unclean [koinos: common or ceremonially defiled] of itself," and "all is clean [katharos: free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless]."

Paul's point is that association of food with idolatrous activity had no bearing on whether the food was inherently suitable or unsuitable for eating. Understood in its context, Romans 14 does not convey permission to ignore the biblical laws as to which meats are clean or unclean.

Did Paul Teach That All Days of Worship Are Alike?

In Romans 14:5-6, Paul wrote: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."

Many people assume from this passage that Paul is saying that whatever day one chooses to rest and worship is irrelevant so long as one is "fully convinced in his own mind" and "observes it to the Lord."

Does this mean that the Fourth Commandment, telling us to remember the seventh-day Sabbath day and keep it holy, is no longer necessary for Christians? Did Paul teach that the Sabbath is no different from any other day or that we are free to choose for ourselves whatever day we wish to observe?

To come to that conclusion, one must read it into the verse, because—notice carefully—the Sabbath is nowhere mentioned here.In fact, the word Sabbath or references to Sabbath-keeping are not found anywhere in the book of Romans. The reference here is simply to "day(s)," not the Sabbath or any other days of rest and worship commanded by God.

Keep in mind that Paul, earlier in this same epistle, had written, "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12), "The doers of the law will be justified" (2:13) and "I delight in the law of God" (7:22). If he were saying here that keeping God's Sabbath day is irrelevant, it would be completely inconsistent with his other clear statements in this same letter. Also, no New Testament writers refer to the Sabbath by such ambiguous phrases as "one day."

Context shows the meaning of "days"

What, then, were the "days" Paul mentions here? We must look at the context to find out.

Notice first that this discussion is about "disputes over doubtful things" (verse 1). These were matters of "opinions" (NRSV), which tells us that Paul isn't addressing issues clearly stated in the Scriptures, such as when and whether to keep the Sabbath.

The passage in question about days is in verses 5 and 6, immediately between references to eating meat, vegetarianism and fasting in verses 2, 3 and 6. There is no biblical connection between Sabbath observance and any of these things, so one must take these verses out of context to assume that Paul was referring to the Sabbath.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains that "the close contextual association with eating suggests that Paul has in mind a special day set apart for observance as a time for feasting or

as a time for fasting" (Everett Harrison, 1976, Vol. 10, p. 146). It is apparent that Paul wasn't discussing the Sabbath, but rather other days during which fasting or abstaining from certain foods was practiced.

Paul was writing to a mixed church of Jewish and gentile believers in Rome (Romans 1:13; 2:17). Personal eating and fasting practices that were not clearly addressed in the Scriptures had become a point of contention for some.

The Talmud records that many Jews of that time fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. They also had other traditional fast days (compare Zechariah 7:3-5). Since some of the Jewish Church members in Rome self-righteously criticized others (Romans 2:17-24), perhaps they had become like the Pharisee who boasted, "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:12), and set themselves up as more righteous than others who were not fasting at these times.

Possibly members of the church at Rome were trying to enforce fasting on particular days on other Christians there, prompting Paul's pointed question: "Who are you to judge another's servant?" (verse 4). Paul appears to be setting the record straight by emphasizing that fasting is a voluntary exercise of worship not limited to a particular day. Therefore, one person's fasting on a particular day when another is eating does not make him more righteous.

Why were some avoiding meat?

In verses 2 and 3 Paul discussed vegetarianism ("he who is weak eats only vegetables") and continued this theme in verse 6 ("he who eats . . . and he who does not eat").

The context shows us that some members of the congregation there were eating meat, and others were abstaining from eating meat. The vegetarians were likely members who "so feared lest they should (without knowing it) eat meat which had been offered to idols or was otherwise ceremonially unclean (which might easily happen in such a place as Rome), that they abstained from meat altogether" (W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, The Life and Epistles of St. Paul, 1974, p. 530).

In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Paul addressed the issue of eating meat that may have been sacrificed to idols and consequently could have been viewed by some members as improper to eat. Paul's point in that chapter was that unknown association of food with idolatrous activity did not make that food unsuitable for eating.

Paul was addressing the same issue to both the Romans and the Corinthians, namely whether members should avoid meats that may have been associated with idolatrous worship.

This is indicated by Paul's reference to " unclean" meat in Romans 14:14. Rather than using the Greek word used to describe those meats listed in the Old Testament as unclean, he used a word meaning "common" or "defiled," which would be appropriate in describing meat that had been sacrificed to idols. (For more details, see "Does Romans 14 Abolish Laws on Unclean Meats?".)

Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 8 was the same as in Romans 14:15: Be especially careful not to offend a fellow member, causing him to stumble or lose faith, over the issue of meats.

In no way was this related to Sabbath observance because God's Sabbath is a "feast" day (Leviticus 23:1-3), not a day when one must abstain from eating meat. The Sabbath is nowhere mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans; it simply wasn't the issue.

Those who look to Romans for justification for their view that Paul abrogates keeping Old Testament laws face the added burden of explaining why, if his purpose is to argue that those laws are done away, Paul quotes from that same Old Testament more than 80 times in this same epistle as authority for his teaching. This simple fact alone confirms Paul's view that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12).

Did Paul Tell the Romans One Thing and the Corinthians the Opposite?

Many people assume that Paul was dismissing any need to keep the Sabbath and other biblical Holy Days when he wrote in Romans 14:5-6: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it"

They assume, with no evidence, that these are the days to which Paul referred here—even though the Sabbath is not even mentioned anywhere in this entire epistle. Paul and the other New Testament writers did not ambiguously refer to the Sabbath by phrases such as "one day." They also overlook the fact that Paul quotes from the Old Testament 84 times in this epistle to support his teaching —hardly the actions of a man who is trying to annul its commands!

The book of Acts sheds considerable light on Paul's thinking when he wrote his epistle to the Romans. Most scholars agree that Paul wrote this epistle while visiting the Greek city of Corinth in or around A.D. 56. What does Acts tell us about Paul's actions in that city?

It shows us that Paul, while in Corinth, "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:1, 4). This is the context of Paul's actions when he wrote the book of Romans. Did he write to the church members in Rome to tell them Sabbath-keeping was irrelevant, while simultaneously teaching Jews and gentiles alike "every Sabbath" in Corinth?

Obviously something is wrong with many people's view of Romans if they seriously believe this is what Paul taught. As the book of Acts shows, regardless of what city Paul was in, Sabbath-keeping was his regular manner or "custom" according to God's commandments (Acts 17:2).

Further proof that this common interpretation of Romans 14 is wrong can be found in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. He wrote this epistle in or around A.D. 55, shortly before he came to Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:5-6) on the visit during which he would write his epistle to the Romans.

What do we find he tells the Corinthians in this letter?

• He tells them to keep the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread in the proper manner, understanding its spiritual intent (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; compare Leviticus 23:6).

• He instructs them on how to keep the New Testament Passover as a commemoration of Jesus Christ's death (1 Corinthians 11:23-30).

• He reminds them that "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

• He writes that he intends to journey to them, but that he will first stay in Ephesus until after the biblical Feast of Pentecost has passed (1 Corinthians 16:8).

If you accept the common misinterpretation of the book of Romans, you would have to conclude that Paul instructed the Corinthians in how to properly observe the Passover, that he told them to keep the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread, and that he noted he was staying in Ephesus until after the biblical Feast of Pentecost—and the very next year wrote to the Romans that none of this mattered and was all unnecessary.

On the other hand, if you understand Paul's teaching to the Romans as it is truthfully presented in this chapter, you will see complete agreement between his actions and the letters he wrote to Church members both in Rome and Corinth.

Peace and Unity in Christ

"Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6, NIV).

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is about God's marvelous plan to bring peace, unity and salvation to all peoples—Jews and gentiles alike. To achieve that goal, God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:9-10, NIV).

His message to those in Colosse contains similar language: "For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:19-20).

Therefore, Paul appeals to Christians, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace"(Ephesians 6:15, NRSV). To achieve that goal, both one's thinking and way of life must be rooted firmly in the teachings of God's Word.

Paul speaks plainly to the non-Jewish Christians whose former conduct had not been based on the Word of God. "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking" (Ephesians 4:17, NIV). They must cease living according to the "course of this world," which is controlled by the "wiles of the devil"(Ephesians 2:2; 6:11).

Instead, they must recognize that they "are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works"(Ephesians 2:10, NIV). Paul's words here are consistent with his words in another letter. Only by studying the Scriptures as "the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) to receive accurate " instruction in righteousness" is it possible that "the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Gentiles and Jews united by a common inheritance

As in other letters, Paul again makes the point that for gentiles to inherit God's promises they must first be grafted—like branches of a wild olive tree—into the root of Israel, the natural olive tree that has descended from Abraham.

Notice how forcefully Paul stresses this: "Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so- called 'Circumcision,' . . . remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:11-13, NASB).

To what were they brought near? To the promise of the same inheritance claimed by Christian

Jews! "For He [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made both [Jews and gentiles] one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation"(verse 14).

What "middle wall of separation" had to be "broken down" so Jews and gentiles could be reconciled in the "one" body, the Church? In verse 15 Paul describes this wall as the "enmity" that divides Jews and gentiles. Whatever that "wall" was, it was a clear symbol of Jewish-gentile enmity. Sadly, that " wall" of enmity is often misinterpreted as God's commandments—His law.

Is that what Paul had in mind in this analogy of a wall that separated Jews and gentiles? Not even remotely! Let's correctly identify the "wall" that vividly symbolized the barrier between the Jews and the gentiles. For that we need to accurately understand a little bit of history and the meaning of two key Greek words that Paul used.

The temple's "middle wall"

In the New Testament the Greek word mesotoichon, meaning "middle wall," occurs only in Ephesians 2:14. The Greek word phragmos, translated "of separation" or "of partition" (KJV) in the same verse, means a "fence" or "railing" and is sometimes translated as "hedge" (Matthew 21:33; Mark 12:1; Luke 14:23).

The meaning of these words indicates that Paul's expression "middle wall of separation" refers to some barrier that divides people as would a fence, railing or hedge. Here a brief history lesson is helpful.

Flavius Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian from a priestly family. In his book Wars of the Jews he used both Greek terms—in separate contexts—for a particular balustrade or barrier at the Jerusalem temple (Book 5, chap. 5, sec. 2 and 6).

Which barrier evoked Paul's comparison to the divisions that existed between gentiles and Jews? It was the wall erected by the Jews to isolate the outer court of the gentiles—the area of the Jewish temple complex where gentiles were allowed—from the inner area around the temple itself, from which all gentiles were banned.

The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Acts explains: "That no Gentile might unwittingly enter into the forbidden areas, notices in Greek and Latin were fixed to the barrier at the foot of the steps leading up to the inner precincts, warning them that death was the penalty for further ingress.

"Two of these notices (both in Greek) have been found—one in 1871 and one in 1935—the text of which runs: 'No foreigner [gentile] may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death'" (1974, p. 434).

Humanly erected barriers

Setting up that physical wall in the outer court of the temple was not commanded in the Scriptures. God never issued any order to erect it. To Paul, this barrier erected by the Jews was

a fitting symbol of the enmity Jews and gentiles had for each other.

The literal, physical "middle wall" was demolished when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. However, several years before its physical destruction Paul pointed to it as a fitting symbol of the prejudicial ethnic and religious barriers that divide human beings.

All such man-made barriers must be "broken down" before mankind can enjoy the peace and unity for which Christ died. Yet, to this day, the world is filled with man-made taboos that divide people culturally, religiously, ethnically and nationally.

Paul is pointing out that in God's plan true reconciliation requires the elimination of barriers that separate people contrary to the intent of the Scriptures. As he had explained to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Was Paul teaching the gentile converts in Ephesus to reject the Jews? No, the thrust of his remarks was just the opposite.

He was making the point that the hope and spiritual future of the Christian gentiles is through participating in the promises made to that "commonwealth" of Abraham's "seed"—not in rejecting the Jews. And neither should the Jews reject the gentiles. The long-standing barriers between Jews and gentiles needed to be broken down. (Be sure to also read " Paul Imprisoned Over a Man-Made Taboo" on page 106.)

Once we understand that man-made ethnic, gender, religious and cultural prejudices are what really stand in the way of the peace and unity that Paul is addressing, then the rest of his remarks begin to make sense. The main focus of Paul's message in Ephesians is "that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6, NIV).

The greatest lifestyle changes had to be made, not by Jewish Christians, but by Christian gentiles. So Paul tells these gentile converts, "You should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them" (Ephesians 4:17-18).

Ignorance alienates people from "the life of God" as revealed through His servants, the apostles and prophets who wrote the Scriptures (Ephesians 2:19-20). When false beliefs are presented as "truth" they become powerful tools of deception.

Traditions that blind humanity

In Ephesians and Colossians we find several closely related passages that address human traditions and warn against yielding to their deceptiveness. In one passage Paul lumps deceptive human traditions together in the phrase "law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Ephesians 2:15).

Notice this warning that Paul gave to those in Colosse: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8, NIV). The ideas Paul was fighting

in Colosse were not biblical ideas but worldly philosophical ideas rooted in human tradition.

It was also human tradition—not God's law—that Paul was combating in Ephesus. We may confirm this by examining both the meaning and usage of certain key Greek words that Paul uses in Ephesians 2 and comparing them to similar or identical Greek words in Colossians 2.

In the Bible, the word "commandments" generally refers to commands of God. But that is not always case. The context in which a command is given will normally reveal its source. For example, a "commandment" could originate from human rulers, military commanders or others who claim to have authority—regardless of whether their claim to authority is legitimate.

This fact is important. In Titus 1:14 Paul uses the Greek word entole for "commandments" which he clearly labels to be "of men." He uses the same word for "commandments" when he writes of "the law of commandments contained in ordinances" in Ephesians 2:15. This Greek word entole is directly related to the Greek word entalma, also translated "commandments"—referring to "commandments and doctrines of men"—in Colossians 2:22.

The point is that Paul's use of entole (Ephesians 2:15) and entalma is not restricted to God's commandments. Claiming that in Ephesians and Colossians these words should always be interpreted as referring to God's law is unsupportable. Both words can be, and often are, used in other ways.

And in Ephesians and Colossians Paul uses them both in reference to commandments of men. This becomes even clearer as we examine some additional words Paul uses.

"Ordinances"

The Greek word translated in the King James Version as "ordinances" in Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 2:14 is dogma. It is rendered variously as " requirements," "decrees" or "regulations" in other English translations. Like the words described above, its meaning is not limited to biblical law or biblical decrees.

Technically, the Greek word dogma means "a formalized rule (or set of rules) prescribing what people must do" (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 1988). Dogma is commonly translated as "decree" and refers to decrees made either by man or God. It is certainly not limited to biblical decrees or laws. Paul uses it in both Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 2:14 in the context of man-made requirements and regulations.

Dogma was such a common Greek word that it was imported into the English language. In English, "dogma" is defined as: "An authoritative principle, belief, or statement of ideas or opinion, especially one considered to be absolutely true" (The New American Heritage Dictionary). We use the English adjective "dogmatic" to describe adamant or unyielding statements and opinions. This corresponds closely to Paul's use of the Greek word dogma in Ephesians and Colossians.

A variation of dogma is the Greek verb dogmatizo, meaning "put under obligation by rules or ordinances, obligate" or, in passive form as in Colossians 2:20, to "submit to rules and regulations" (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2000, p. 254).

Paul's use of these words is plain. He uses the word ordinances (dogma in Colossians 2:14 and Ephesians 2:15, dogmatizo in Colossians 2:20) to mean humanly imposed regulations and rules –the " commandments and doctrines of men." The context of his remarks makes it clear that this was his intended meaning. In both letters (Ephesians and Colossians) Paul is addressing dogmatic, man-made decrees that separate human beings from one another.

God's law is never a factor when Paul is discussing these man-made restrictions. Neither his words nor his grammar in those contexts give confirmation to such a conclusion. Yet that is the most common conclusion presented—without merit—from these passages.

Those who try to make God's law the focus of Paul's comments inject their own prejudices into his remarks. They do this because for hundreds of years such traditions have influenced theological thinking. However, this anti-law, anti-Jewish thinking is currently being rejected by some of today's most knowledgeable scholars.

Long ago Paul put his finger on the real cause of this thinking when he wrote: "For the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law, for it is unable to do so" (Romans 8:7-8, Holman Christian Standard Bible). So long as hostility toward God's law dominates human thinking, mankind will never achieve peace. God's solution is to write His laws in our hearts and minds.

For that to happen, we first must drop from our reasoning those human traditions that are contrary to God's laws—traditions promoting hostility and division instead of peace, love and unity. The true Christian teaching is, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Paul's use of "law" in Ephesians 2:15

We now come to the meaning of the Greek word translated "law" as used by Paul in the phrase, "the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Ephesians 2:15). That Greek word is nomos, which can be used with a broad range of meanings.

In the New Testament nomos is generally used for biblical law, especially the Torah (the five books of Moses) either as a whole or in part. But, like the word commandments, it is not exclusively limited to biblical law.

In addition to divine law it also may mean: "procedure or practice that has taken hold, a custom, rule, principle, norm" (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, p. 677). Nomos is so broad in meaning that it may, and often does, refer to customs, principles or laws that are distinct from the law of God.

The awkward expression "law of commandments contained in ordinances" may be more accurately rendered "the rule of decrees contained in regulations" made by men. That would better reflect Paul's intended meaning.

In Ephesians 2:15, Paul is simply stating that Jesus Christ—in His "flesh" (by His death for our sins)—invalidated human regulations devised by men as the criteria for judging others. His emphasis is that Christ's example is the proper yardstick for all relationships.

He summarizes the point in these words: "We should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head– Christ–from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:14-16).

Christ has "abolished" hostility

Notice how the Greek word katargeo–translated "abolished" in Ephesians 2:15–fits Paul's intended focus. The basic meaning of katargeo is "to cause to lose its power or effectiveness, invalidate, make powerless" (Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, p. 525).

The Friberg Analytical Lexicon explains that "the term always denotes a nonphysical destruction by means of a superior force coming in to replace the force previously in effect, as, e.g. light destroys darkness" (emphasis added). Paul uses this word in a context of replacing enmity (hostility) with loving unity and respect.

Accepting Christ's death to blot out personal sins put Jews and gentiles on equal footing before God. By making forgiveness of sin available to all peoples, Christ abolished every excuse to maintain hostility toward others. This is the real message in Ephesians 2.

And that message is supported by Paul's comments in Colossians 2. Neither chapter has anything to do with abolishing God's law.

Paul Imprisoned Over a Man-Made Taboo

Both internal and historical evidence indicates that Paul was in prison when he wrote his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. The reason for his imprisonment probably explains why he chose to use the term middle wall of separation in Ephesians 2:14 to represent man-made and discriminatory decrees that alienate and divide people.

Paul's imprisonment resulted from a false charge that he had taken a gentile with him past a forbidden checkpoint in the temple compound (Acts 21:29). In an article titled "The Wall Is Gone," Craig McMahon gives this revealing observation of why that dividing "wall of separation" was likely so prominent in Paul's thinking.

"The most promising [explanation] . . . identifies the 'dividing wall' with the temple wall that cordoned off the Outer Court of the Gentiles from the various inner courts of the Jews. Rhetorically speaking, this temple wall functions as a poignant metaphor of the social and spiritual exclusion of the Gentiles by the Jews. No Gentile was allowed to pass beyond this five-foot high stone wall into the Jewish section of the temple . . .

"Historically speaking, this same temple wall played a pivotal role in the course of Paul's ministry. Acts 21:26-36 recounts the story of Paul having been seen in the exclusively Jewish area of the temple with some strangers, one of whom was assumed to be a Gentile, Trophimus of Ephesus.

"Jewish worshipers seized Paul, making the accusation that 'he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place' (v. 28). This allegation charged that Paul was guilty of aiding Gentiles in breaching the dividing wall . . .

"If in fact Paul wrote Ephesians during this lengthy period of imprisonment . . . then the acknowledgment in Eph. 3:1 ('I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles') may be an historical reminiscence of his arrest for allegedly violating the restrictions of the temple wall . . .

"Paul's mention of the dividing wall . . . fits the probable historical context of Ephesians and is also well-suited to the rhetorical purposes of this passage—namely, depicting the former separation between Jew and Gentile and the new order created in Christ" (Review and Expositor, Spring 1996, p. 262).

The Corruption of Apostolic Christianity

Almost immediately after the Roman armies destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70, intense prejudice against Jewish beliefs and customs spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire. Then, following the deaths of Paul and John, that prejudice led to the first great "falling away" from the New Covenant teachings as explained by Christ's apostles (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Before that destructive event, the predominantly gentile congregations raised up by Paul were "imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea " (1 Thessalonians 2:14). They followed the same spiritual way of life the Jewish Christians practiced.

After the fall of Jerusalem, however, living that way of life became much more difficult. A higher level of faith and courage was needed that many converts did not have. As a result, worldly prejudices against all things Jewish began to enter gentile Christianity. Distorted views of Paul's writings from "untaught and unstable" leaders began to undermine the way of life and pattern of worship that former gentile Christians had copied from their Jewish brethren (2 Peter 3:16).

From the last part of the first century though the fourth century, the part of the Christian religion given attention by historians accepted dramatic changes. A new concept of "progressive revelation" allowed church leaders to revise doctrine to suit their perceptions of church needs—instead of adhering strictly to teachings handed down by the apostles. The entire way of life taught by the apostles was steadily abandoned until what most considered the Christian religion bore little resemblance to the original apostolic teachings.

Jesus knew that this distorted, law-rejecting form of Christianity would emerge. He warned: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name…and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

Those who remain faithful to the teaching of the apostles consistently use the Scriptures as the foundation for how they live. Thus, the Church that Jesus built has remained a "little flock," as He labeled His followers (Luke 12:32).

What Was 'Wiped Out' by Jesus Christ's Death?

The inadequate and misleading translation of a passage in Colossians 2 in some Bible versions is often used to support the flawed belief that God's law was "wiped out" by Jesus Christ who is improperly alleged to have "taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (using the words of verse 14).

The verse in question is Colossians 2:14, which refers to Christ "having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." Does this say that God's law was wiped out or nailed to the cross, as many contend?

Let us first note that God's law is not something that is "against us." On the contrary, it is " holy, and just and good" (Romans 7:12). Scripture always refers to it being a blessing to humankind (see "God's Law: Is It a Burden or a Blessing?").

Christ did indeed take out of the way something that was nailed to His cross. But that something was the record of our sins—our transgressions—not God's law. A careful look at Paul's original wording in the Greek proves this to be true.

The Greek word translated as "having wiped out" or "blotting out" (KJV) or "having canceled" (NASB) in Colossians 2:14 is exaleipho. It means "to wash, or to smear completely . . . to wipe away, wipe off, obliterate" (Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "blot out").

The Scriptures always use exaleipho in reference to wiping away sin, not law. In Acts 3:19 Peter uses this word when he urges his listeners to " repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away" (NIV).

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word machah—translated "wipe out" or "blot out" is (like exaleipho) used for trespasses and sins. Isaiah quotes God saying, "I, even I, am He who blots out [machah] your transgressions for My own sake . . ." (Isaiah 43:25; compare Psalm 51:1, 9; Exodus 32:31-33). Only sins, or people who insist on remaining sinners, are wiped out, not God's law. This becomes clear as we examine the next phrase that Paul uses in Colossians 2:14.

The "handwriting of requirements"

The Romans nailed two things to the cross at the time of Jesus Christ's crucifixion: Jesus Himself and an inscription that He was " king of the Jews"—the charge of treason against Rome for which He was executed.

But Paul adds that something else was also (figuratively) nailed to Jesus Christ's cross—"the handwriting of requirements that was against us."

The phrase translated "handwriting of requirements" is cheirographon tois dogmasin in the original Greek. This is the only place it appears in the New Testament.

The Friberg Lexicon explains cheirographon dogma as a "strictly handwritten document; in legal matters a promissory note, record of indebtedness, bond; figuratively in [Colossians] 2.14 not as the law itself, but as the record of charges . . .which stood against us and which God symbolically removed by 'nailing it to the cross'" (Bible Works software, emphasis added).

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words further explains: "This means a memorandum of debt, 'a writing by hand' used in public and private contracts, and it is a technical word in the Greek papyri. A large number of ancient notes of hand have been published and of these Dr. Deissmann says, 'a stereotyped formula in these documents is the promise to pay back the borrowed money, "I will repay"; and they all are in the debtor's own hand, or, if he could not write, in the handwriting of another acting for him, with the express remark, "I have written for him"'. . .

"In the famous Florentine papyrus of A.D. 85, the governor of Egypt gives this order in the course of a trial,—'Let the hand-writing be crossed out,' which corresponds to the 'blotting out the hand-writing' of Col[ossians] 2:14" (Graham Scroggie, forward to Vine's, Logos Library System, 1997).

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament adds: "The point of the metaphor of the note of indebtedness is rather to underline the previous statement . . . [that] God has forgiven sins. He has canceled the note of indebtedness by taking it and fixing it to the cross of Christ" (Gerhard Kittel, 1995, Vol. 9, p. 436, emphasis added).

The language of Paul's time associates this word with a handwritten legal debt or a penalty owed, not with God's law.

The last word we'll examine is "requirements" as used in "handwriting of requirements." The Greek word used here is dogmasin, which denotes "an opinion, (a public) decree" (Robert Thomas, New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries, 1999). This expression was used of an official handwritten sentence or charge against someone for breaking a law.

Thus the New Living Translation renders this verse as: "He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross."

The Contemporary English Translation translates this verse as: "God wiped out the charges that were against us for disobeying the Law of Moses. He took them away and nailed them to the cross."

The New Testament in Modern English reads: "Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross."

What happened at the crucifixion

A good way to visualize this is to consider a detail of what happened at Christ's crucifixion: "And

they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matthew 27:37). The New Living Translation says: "A signboard was fastened to the cross above Jesus' head, announcing the charge against him."

Jewish religious leaders accused Jesus of having ambitions to replace Caesar as king of the Jews. Their precise charge before Pilate was, "Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar" (John 19:12).

This explains Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (Matthew 27:11). When Jesus refused to defend Himself, Pilate consented to the charge brought to him by the leaders of the Jews and nailed it to Christ's cross at His crucifixion.

The handwritten decree that Pilate nailed above Christ's head stated publicly the official charge for which Jesus was crucified. It falsely implied that Jesus was guilty of committing treason against Caesar.

Therefore, Jesus was officially executed as a transgressor. That charge was false. But by accepting the death penalty for that false charge He became the substitute sin bearer for the legitimate charges that God has against us. He "wiped out" the charges that require our death for our transgressions by taking those charges on Himself. In so doing, He made possible the forgiveness of sin (Colossians 2:13).

What Does 'Shadow of Things to Come' Mean?

Paul explains in Colossians 2:17 that God's weekly Sabbath day and sacred festivals are "a shadow of things to come" (verse 17). Many think he was saying this to demean them and show why they are unnecessary for Christians. The reality is just the opposite. Paul was acknowledging their abiding significance for us.

In the Greek language the word mello, translated "to come," is a present active participle. It explicitly points to events yet future. According to The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, mello means "to be about to do or suffer something, to be at the point of, to be impending" (Spiros Zodhiates, 1992, p. 956). Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words explains its meaning as "to be about (to do something), often implying the necessity and therefore the certainty of what is to take place" (1985, "Come, Came," p. 109).

Paul is saying that the Sabbath and Holy Days, which the Colossians celebrated by feasting according to biblical instruction, had been given by God to foreshadow future events—things yet to come. The grammar of Paul's statement requires this meaning.

When God first commanded that these "feasts of the Lord" be observed (Leviticus 23:2-4), each event they foreshadowed was still in the future. Even today, most of the events foreshadowed by these festivals are yet to be fulfilled in God's plan.

These sacred days have always foreshadowed God's promises to intervene in human affairs through Jesus Christ. They signify the fulfillment of His master plan to offer salvation to all of humankind through Jesus Christ. Therefore, their themes and symbolism are unequivocally Christian.

Paul understood and taught this.

The Calendar Used by the Earliest Gentile Christians

The following quote from a book by Dr. Troy Martin, professor of Religious Studies at Chicago's Saint Xavier University, on Paul's letter to the Colossians provides an effective rebuttal to the common but false argument that Paul taught Christian gentiles not to observe the sacred days that were used by the Jews.

"Only by avoiding time-keeping altogether or by adhering to the Jewish calendar [could] the Pauline communities escape idolatrous alternatives. Other time-keeping systems name the days and the months after pagan deities and mark out the seasons by pagan rites.

"In contrast, the Jews distinguish the seasons by festivals that obviously have no pagan connotations. They recognize the months by new moons and name these months using agricultural terms. They designate the week by Sabbaths, and beginning from the Sabbath, they number, instead of name, the days of the week one through six. The only options available to Paul and his communities are Jewish, pagan or no time-keeping system at all, and the evidence indicates they opt for the former.

"The references to time in Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians exclusively reflect the adoption of a Jewish calendar. Even in a place like Corinth, Paul speaks of the first day from Sabbath (. . . 1 Cor. 16:2), not the days of the sun. He builds an elaborate argument based upon the festivals of passover and unleavened bread (1 Cor. 5:6-8) to exhort the Corinthians, 'Let us keep the festival' (1 Cor. 5:8).

"Although the temporal references in Paul's letters are sparse, 1 Corinthians provides strong evidence for the Pauline adoption of the Jewish religious calendar. In addition to 1 Corinthians, the portrait of Paul and Christian communities in the book of Acts demonstrates that the Christians adhered to the Jewish calendar" (By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique, 1996, pp. 125-127).

The Ascetic Philosophy Affecting the Colossians

Paul warned the Christian gentiles in Colosse, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8, NASB). Some believe Paul here was telling them to avoid those teaching that God's laws regarding the Sabbath, festivals, dietary restrictions, etc., were still in effect. This notion is false, as Paul himself elsewhere taught that Christians—Jew and gentile alike—should keep these laws.

The most thorough description of the philosophy Paul was actually warning against in Colossians is found in Colossians 2:20-23. Its ascetic claims to superiority were based on their deceptive "appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body" (verse 23, NRSV).

Paul indicates that touting their ascetic views as equivalent to and in harmony with the basics or elemental things of the kosmos, meaning in Greek the basic principles of the surrounding world, is what gave the philosophy its appeal.

The analysis of Dr. Troy Martin, professor of Religious Studies at Chicago's Saint Xavier University, of the grammar and syntax of verses 20-23 sheds light on the main components of the philosophy's self-touted "wisdom" Paul rejects.

Verse 23 reads, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence" (NRSV).

Professor Martin explains: "Even though Col. 2.20-23 is syntactically one of the most difficult sentences in the New Testament, it can be understood and adequately translated . . . [and thus provide] important information about the opposition.

"Since the practices stated in the apodosis [the results clause of a conditional sentence] are not those of the readers and since the author is warning his readers against adopting their opponents' practices, the type of dogmatizing mentioned in the apodosis probably originates with the opposition.

"This probability is increased because v. 20, which asserts the elements of the cosmos as the basis for the dogmatizing, is congruent with v. 8, which establishes the same elements as the basis for the opponents' philosophical tradition. This probability is further increased because the phrase, 'according to human commandments and teachings', used in v. 22 to describe the dogmatizing is similar to the phrase, 'according to human tradition', used in v. 8 to describe the opponents' philosophical method.

"Furthermore, the explicit, dogmatic examples given in v. 21 imply a definite situation against which the author is reacting. These ascetic admonitions probably belong to the opponents since v. 23 establishes their treating the body severely and v. 16 mentions their objections to the

Colossians' food and drink.

"The reference to the reputation of the human commandments and teachings in v. 23 implies a specific, recognizable tradition that is different than the Christian tradition of the author and his readers . . .

"There are several characteristics about the opponents that emerge from this passage. First, they engage in dogmatizing based upon a particular physic [their analysis of the basic principles of the world]. Their dogmatizing arises from a consideration of the elements of the cosmos [i.e., surrounding world] and pertains to complete abstinence from consumer goods ["things destined to perish with the using," verse 22, NASB] that do not occur naturally.

"Secondly, their dogmatizing is congruent with a self conception that they are inhabitants of the cosmos [again, the surrounding world].

"Thirdly, their dogmatizing is also congruent with human commandments and teachings that have a reputation for wisdom. These commandments and teachings have a positive reputation because they pertain to will worship and humblemindedness. This humblemindedness is not social humility that shows regard for others but an ascetic humility reflected in severe treatment of the body.

"The opponents would . . . consider their dogmatizing as a positive program that correctly integrates those who inhabit the cosmos into the cosmic order" (By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique, 1996, pp. 55-56).

With these and other considerations, Professor Martin concludes: "The entire complex relative clause in [Colossians] 2.23 that modifies the human commandments and teachings and concludes the apodosis [the results clause] of the conditional sentence that began in v. 20 can now be translated. Indeed, the entire conditional sentence of Col. 2:20-23 can be translated as follows:

"'If you died with Christ, are you decreeing anything for yourselves from the elements of the cosmos as if you were living in the cosmos [i.e., the surrounding world order]? Are you decreeing anything for yourselves such as "Do not handle nor taste nor touch any of the things that are destined for destruction by human consumption?" Are you decreeing anything for yourselves according to human commandments and teachings that are for the fulfillment of the flesh although they have a reputation for wisdom on account of will worship and a humblemindedness consisting of severity to the body, not (a humblemindedness) consisting of honor to anyone?'" (ibid., pp. 54-55, emphasis in original).

These characteristics, Professor Martin concludes, appear to point to the ascetic Cynic philosophy as the one challenging the Colossians' confidence in the divinely revealed wisdom that leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ. This philosophy of extreme asceticism that thrived at that time deceptively represented its teachings as embodying humility and wisdom. Paul is arguing against misguided human philosophy, not against the need to keep God's law.

Colossians 2:16-17: Are God's Laws Obsolete?

Many people assume from Colossians 2:16-17 that Paul is saying that God's laws about the Sabbath, Holy Days and clean and unclean meats are no longer necessary. "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days . . ." he wrote (KJV). Let's examine these verses' context and historic setting to see if they support that view.

Did Paul intend to say that God's laws are abolished? If so, we find some immediate problems. If this is what he meant, it's difficult to explain why he left the issue so muddled by not clearly stating that these practices were unnecessary. After all, the Colossian church was primarily gentile (Colossians 2:13), so Paul could have used this epistle to make it plain that these practices were not binding on Christians.

However, Paul nowhere said that. Instead, regarding the practices of festivals, new moons and Sabbaths, he said only to "let no one judge you," which is quite different from saying these practices are unnecessary or obsolete.

A more basic question to ask is whether Old Testament practices were even at the core of what Paul was addressing here. Was Paul even discussing whether Christians should keep the laws regarding clean and unclean meats, the biblical festivals, the weekly Sabbath or any other Old Testament laws?

When we read the rest of this chapter, it quickly becomes obvious that other issues were involved. Among these were "principalities and powers" (verse 15), "false humility and worship of angels" (verse 18), ascetic rules forbidding to touch, taste and handle (verse 21) and "neglect of the body" (verse 23).

Further, Paul referred to the false teachings in Colosse as rooted in "persuasive words" (verse 4), "philosophy and empty deceit" and "the tradition of men" (verse 8). He also referred to submitting to "regulations" of this world (verse 20) and "the commandments and doctrines of men" (verse 22).

Could Paul, who in Romans 7:12 described God's law as "holy and just and good," possibly be referring to the same law here, or is he addressing something entirely different?

When we consider the historical context, the answer becomes clear. As the Church expanded from the Holy Land into pagan areas such as Asia Minor, Italy and Greece, it had to deal with pagan philosophies, some with very ascetic beliefs. These influences are particularly noticeable in the writings of Paul, Peter and John.

Some of these philosophies overlapped in the idea that spirit is good while matter is evil. The physical body, consisting of matter, was considered evil. And since the body was evil, it was to be treated harshly.

The Colossian Christians were being judged by a worldly philosophy for how they observed festivals, new moons and Sabbaths—which they apparently did in a joyous and festive manner. The Colossians celebrated these days in a manner that was entirely contrary to the ascetic

approach of self-denial. They understood that the Sabbaths and annual festivals are clearly commanded in the Old Testament. (New moons, it should be noted, were used as the biblical markers of time but never declared to be sacred Sabbaths, nor are they listed among the annual sacred festivals.)

By cautioning the Colossian members not to let others judge them for how they observed these times, Paul didn't question whether they should be kept. The obvious implication of these verses is that these gentile Christians were in fact observing these days, and in no way did Paul tell them to desist.

Instead, the issue he addressed is that Christians should not let others judge them by misguided ascetic standards concerning what they ate or drank or how they observed the Sabbaths or festivals (verse 16).

Colossians 2 is actually a condemnation of ascetic human philosophy, not a discussion of which laws are binding for Christians!

The Apostles, the Old Testament and God's Law

"Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men'" (Acts 5:29).

As we have repeatedly seen, one of the most misguided conceptions of the New Covenant is the idea that through it Jesus Christ canceled obedience to the laws contained in the Old Testament. That inaccurate conception has been taught—with many variations—for nearly 2,000 years. Therefore it is crucial to set the record straight on what Christ's apostles really taught concerning the laws given to define righteousness found in the Old Testament.

An index in the Complete Jewish Bible catalogs 695 separate quotations of Old Testament passages in the New Testament (David Stern, 1998, pp. 1610-1615). In dozens of additional places the Old Testament is referred to (as in cases where an Old Testament figure is mentioned), but no specific scripture is quoted.

Depending on which scholar's work you examine, the number of quotations and references in the New Testament to the Old may be as high as 4,105 (Roger Nicole, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 617). In comparison, New Testament writers quoted each other only four times. Yet some people still argue that the teaching of the New Testament is that the Old Testament is obsolete, only valid for a specific people at a limited time in history.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary notes how much the Old Testament permeated the thinking and writing of the New Testament authors: "One very notable feature of the N[ew] T[estament] is the extent to which it alludes to or quotes the O[ld] T[estament]. It appeals to the OT in order to provide proof of statements made, confirmation for positions espoused, illustration of principles advanced, and answers to questions raised.

"Frequently, even when no formal citation is given or perhaps even intended, the NT writers follow forms of thought or speech patterned after OT passages. It is apparent that the NT writers and our Lord himself were so steeped in the language and truths of OT revelation that they naturally expressed themselves in terms reminiscent of it" (ibid.).

Those who insist the New Testament teaches that the Old Testament is outmoded and irrelevant for Christians today ignore the abundance of evidence to the contrary within that same New Testament!

The simplest way to understand how the Old Testament applies to Christians under the New Covenant is simply to see what the apostles taught on the subject. After all, these men were those closest to Jesus Christ, having spent much time with Him and been personally taught by Him.

First we'll look at James, Peter, John and Jude, whose epistles bear their names. Their writings are called the "general epistles" because they are addressed to all early Christians as a whole and include general Christian instruction. Then we will let Paul explain for himself how he felt

about obeying the Old Testament scriptures.

James' view toward the law

James was apparently the earliest of these four writers, authoring his epistle sometime before he was martyred in A.D. 62. As the half brother of Jesus Christ (Matthew 13:55), he was no doubt intimately familiar with Jesus' attitude and approach toward the Old Testament and God's laws.

James couldn't be clearer as to how he understood God's laws to apply to Christians. He refers to that law as "the royal law" (James 2:8) and "the law of liberty" (verse 12), recognizing that obedience to that law frees us from sin and its harmful consequences. "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does," he writes in James 1:25.

He again specifically upholds keeping God's commands when he writes: "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well" (James 2:8; quoting Leviticus 19:18). He goes on to explain that we cannot pick and choose which of God's commands to obey before concluding that we must speak and act "as those who will be judged by the law of liberty" (verse 12).

James also tells us that simply saying we have faith and believe in God is useless—because even the demons acknowledge as much (verse 19). He uses the Old Testament examples of Abraham and Rahab to show that our faith must be accompanied by actions—that faith without works is dead (verses 17-26).

He also points out that it isn't enough to simply avoid sin—that if we know to do good but don't do it, that also is sin (James 4:17). As Jesus Christ did in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48), James holds Christians to a higher standard of conduct than simply following the letter of the law—he expects us to live by its full spiritual intent.

Peter's use of the Old Testament as his authority

The apostle Peter was a leader among the apostles and played a major role in the early Church. Peter's only preserved letters are his two epistles, 1 and 2 Peter, both apparently written in the 60s before Peter was martyred in A.D. 67 or 68.

What do these letters tell us about how Peter viewed the Old Testament and God's law? While the subject of law-keeping nowhere comes up directly in Peter's epistles, what he does write makes his views crystal clear.

He repeats God's command in Leviticus 11:44, telling us to "be holy in all your conduct, because it is written [in the Old Testament Scriptures], 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). Quoting Isaiah 40:8, he reminds us that "the word of the Lord endures forever" (verse 25).

He compares the Church to a new temple being built for God (1 Peter 2:5) and describes Church members as a new priesthood dedicated to serving God (verses 5, 9). He refers to

Sarah, Abraham and Noah (1 Peter 3:6, 20) to illustrate various points in his letter. In his first epistle, he quotes from the Old Testament more than a dozen times as the authority for what he is saying.

In his second epistle, written shortly before his death (2 Peter 1:14-15; compare John 21:18-19), Peter reminds us that the Old Testament prophets spoke (and wrote) under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

He speaks of the fearful judgment God brings on mankind for sin, using as examples the sin-filled world of Noah's day and the degenerate cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God exterminated as "an example to those who afterward would live ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5-6).

He also uses the prophet Balaam as an example of the disobedience to God's commands that brings His condemnation (2 Peter 2:15). And he reminds us of the need to "be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets" in the Old Testament, as well as the words of the apostles (2 Peter 3:1-2).

John teaches obedience to God's commandments

John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 21:7, 20, 24), repeatedly talks about the need to keep God's commandments in his epistles, apparently written between A.D. 85-95 when he was the last of the original 12 apostles still living. His hard-hitting statements speak for themselves:

"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4).

"Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

"And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22).

"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3).

"This is love, that we walk according to His commandments" (2 John 6).

Jude and the Old Testament

Jude, like James, was also a half brother of Jesus Christ (Matthew 13:55) and knew Him from childhood. Though his short epistle contains only 25 verses, he manages to include many references to the Old Testament, including Israel's wandering in the wilderness, Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses, Cain, Balaam, Korah and Enoch.

The record from these men who learned personally from Jesus Christ is clear. They uphold the Old Testament as God's inspired revelation to mankind for all time and affirm that keeping God's commandments remains a requirement for Christians today.

How Paul's teachings were twisted

Paul wrote to the evangelist Timothy, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Since Paul had just defined "Scripture" in the previous verse as that which Timothy had known "from childhood," this could refer only to the Old Testament—since the New Testament had not yet been written and compiled. Thus Paul's view of the Old Testament scriptures' necessity for Christian understanding and living is plain.

Yet most theologians and preachers today think Paul regarded the Old Testament scriptures as obsolete. They see him as the person who first taught that these Scriptures are no longer needed as an authoritative guidebook for Christians.

In reaching this conclusion, they distort some of Paul's difficult-to-understand passages for support of their claim that Jesus Christ—by dying on the cross—abolished the Old Testament law.

In making that judgment they ignore Peter's cautionary warning that "Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written . . . some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

When we examine Paul's writings carefully, it is absurd to presume that he used as his primary authority the very writings he was supposedly dismissing. He consistently appeals to the Old Testament scriptures as the main authority for what he taught!

Paul defends his faithfulness to Scripture

The first accusations that Paul was disregarding God's law came from certain Jews who vigorously objected to his preaching that gentiles could be saved without submitting to the rite of circumcision. They falsely accused him of abandoning God's law and his Jewish heritage. Paul denied the charge vigorously and set forth clear scriptural authority for his teachings and behavior.

To help Paul demonstrate that all allegations of his spurning of God's law were untrue, some of the Christians in Jerusalem requested that he accompany four particular Christian Jews in performing purification rites at the temple as set forth in biblical law (Acts 21:17-26). Paul embraced the opportunity, eager to silence his critics and publicly confirm his faithfulness to the Scriptures.

However, "when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia [opponents of Paul], seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place'" (verses 27-28).

They were lying. Nevertheless, a riot erupted and the Roman commander had to rescue Paul from the hostile Jewish mob that was attempting to kill him.

Paul requested permission to speak in his own defense to the assembled crowd. Permission was granted (verse 40) and he spoke. Afterward he was taken before the Sanhedrin, the high council of the Jews, and from there transferred to the city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast to appear before the Roman governor Felix. The Roman commander of the Jerusalem garrison, in a letter to Felix, included this explanation:

"This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman [that is, Paul possessed Roman citizenship]. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council [the Sanhedrin]. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains" (Acts 23:27-29).

Notice Paul's rebuttal of the false accusations made against him: "Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: 'Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city.

"Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me. But this I confess to you, that . . . I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men'" (Acts 24:10-16).

How unequivocally plain! Years after he first became a Christian, Paul could declare that he still believed "all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets"—a Jewish term for the entire Old Testament. This testimony, from Paul's own lips, removes all doubt about where he stood in regard to the law of God.

Paul's second court defense of his teachings

Two years later Paul was summoned again to appear in court before a new Roman governor, Porcius Festus (verse 27). "When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove. Then Paul made his defense: 'I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar'" (Acts 25:7-8, NIV).

These official court appearances are significant. They establish, in Paul's own words, that he continued to be firmly committed to both believing and doing all of God's laws—the same laws the Jews claimed to obey. And none of his accusers could produce any provable evidence to the contrary. All allegations made against him were untrue—just like all modern claims that he taught against Old Testament laws are equally untrue!

Nevertheless, those same inaccurate and slanderous rumors that started with Paul's false accusers so long ago are still circulating today. They have become the basis of what is now

commonly referred to as "Pauline theology."

This theological philosophy still presents Paul as someone committed to separating Christianity from its Jewish roots. It portrays Him as one who rejected his biblical heritage and initiated changes in teaching that repudiated all Old Testament laws.

But, as was explained above, that's a far cry from what Paul actually believed and taught. Throughout his life Paul defended Old Testament scripture as not only inspired but also profitable for "instruction in righteousness" for all Christians (again, see 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

That Scripture contains God's law, which distinguishes righteousness from sin. It is little wonder, therefore, that Paul would exclaim, "Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Romans 7:7, NIV).

Jesus and Paul Emphasize the Law's Correct Focus

By the time of Jesus and Paul, some Jewish religious leaders had distorted the focus of God's law. They were trying to impress God with their righteousness by paying more attention to the smallest details of the physical aspects of the law than to its spiritual purpose.

Paul pinpointed their problem: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1-3).

Jesus emphasized the law's original purpose and spiritual intent (Matthew 5:17-48). This irritated many Jewish religious leaders. They had fallen into the habit of measuring righteousness according to outward appearance. They emphasized physical details and ceremonial cleanliness to the neglect of the "weightier matters" of God's law, such as justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23-25).

Jesus sternly criticized this misplaced emphasis: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (verses 27-28, NRSV).

Their distorted emphasis stripped away the real intent and purpose for God's law. In contrast, Christ upheld the real intent of the law. And Paul simply continued Christ's correct emphasis—including the fact that the law's ceremonies and rituals served only as temporary reminders of better things to come.

Both Jesus and Paul always upheld the law's teachings that affect our heart, mind and behavior. These aspects of the law remain eternally applicable. They reveal not only what is sinful but also the true righteousness God desires to write in our hearts and minds. Christians are directed to rightly understand and willingly apply the true focus of the law to their own lives.

Paul Regularly Used the Old Testament as the Authority for His Teaching

In many Bible versions it can be difficult to tell when a New Testament writer is quoting from the Old Testament. Some, however, like the Complete Jewish Bible, make those references obvious.

This version points out 183 Old Testament passages that Paul quotes or paraphrases in his writings. And this figure doesn't include his additional dozens of references to people, places and events in the Old Testament.

Curiously, two of the books that misguided theologians quote from the most in arguing that Paul dismissed the Old Testament are those with the highest number of quotes from it: Romans (with quotes or paraphrases of 84 Old Testament passages) and Hebrews (which many scholars believe was written by Paul, with 83).

Paul's other books, with the number of references to Old Testament passages, are as follows: 1 Corinthians (26); 2 Corinthians (18); Galatians (14); Ephesians (12); Philippians (6); Colossians (3); 1 Thessalonians (1); 2 Thessalonians (7); 1 Timothy (4) and 2 Timothy (9). Only Paul's two shortest epistles, Titus and Philemon, contain no quotes from the Old Testament.

It's obvious from these figures that Paul used the Hebrew Scriptures to support his teaching. In fact, he constantly used the Old Testament as the authority for his teaching!

What did Paul expressly say about those same Scriptures?

• In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 he writes: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God [literally 'God-breathed'], and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The "Scripture" here, known to Timothy since childhood (verse 15), could only have been the Old Testament.

• In Romans 3:2, referring to the Old Testament, Paul says that the Jewish people "have been entrusted with the very words of God" (NIV).

• Referring to various incidents recorded in the Old Testament, he tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that "all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

• In Hebrews 3:7 he speaks of the Holy Spirit directly inspiring the words of the Old Testament.

• In Hebrews 4:12, referring to the Old Testament, he writes: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Do these passages sound like the statements of a man who taught that the Old Testament was obsolete or no longer necessary? The answer is obvious!

Acts Shows What the Early Church Believed and Practiced

The book of Acts is a key historical record of what the early Church believed and practiced. Its initial chapters describe the Church's founding and early years; its later chapters describe the travels and actions of the apostle Paul.

The common view among most churches today is that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament laws and that Paul taught that keeping these laws was no longer necessary for Christians. But what does the book of Acts reveal about what the early Church thought and did? Does it support this view, or does it show us something very different? Was it in conflict with typical Jewish custom and practice of the day as laid down in the Old Testament? Look at the evidence yourself—you be the judge!

Acts 2:1 —The New Testament Church miraculously began when the members were assembled on the Feast of Pentecost (also called the Feast of Weeks or Firstfruits), in accordance with God's commands of Leviticus 23:15-16, 21 and Deuteronomy 16:16.

Acts 2:46 —The early Church met daily "with one accord in the temple."

Acts 5:19-20 —After the apostles were imprisoned, an angel told the apostles to continue teaching at the temple.

Acts 5:21, 25, 42 —The apostles continued teaching in the temple.

Acts 5:32 — Peter taught that God gives His Holy Spirit "to those who obey Him."

Acts 6:7 —"A large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (NIV)—they saw no contradiction between Christianity and their roles as priests.

Acts 7:1-53 —Stephen explained that Jesus Christ and Christianity are the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and a natural outgrowth of what the Old Testament scriptures foretold.

Acts 8:26-39 —Philip explained to the Ethiopian eunuch how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Acts 9:20 —Immediately after his miraculous conversion, Paul "preached the Christ in the synagogues" in Damascus.

Acts 10:14 —About a decade after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Peter said, "I have never eaten anything common or unclean"—he obviously was continuing to obey God's laws regarding clean and unclean meats found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

Acts 11:8 — Peter recounted the event, saying, "Nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth."

Acts 13:5 —In Salamis on Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas "preached the word of God in the

synagogues of the Jews."

Acts 13:14-41 —In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath, explaining from the Old Testament scriptures that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and Son of God.

Acts 13:42 —At the conclusion of this synagogue service, "the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath." If the Sabbath were done away, Paul and Barnabas missed a golden opportunity to explain to these gentiles that they could teach them the very next day—Sunday—or any other day. Instead they met again the next Sabbath!

Acts 13:44 —"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God" taught by Paul and Barnabas. In all of the many mentions of Paul teaching on the Sabbath, not once is there so much as a hint that they need not be there to observe the Sabbath as commanded, nor any hint that they should instead meet on Sunday.

Acts 14:1 — Paul and Barnabas taught in the synagogue in Iconium.

Acts 15:20-21 —At the conclusion of the Jerusalem conference on the issue of circum-cision, the Church pointed gentile Christians to regulations that would allow them to meet alongside Jews in synagogues, where "Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (NIV). (To learn more, see "The Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15: What Was Decided?".)

Acts 16:13 —In Philippi, Paul met with Jews on the Sabbath beside a river and taught them about Jesus Christ.

Acts 17:1-2 —In Thessalonica, Paul, "as his custom was," went to the synagogue "and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures."

Acts 17:10-11 —In Berea, Paul and Silas "went into the synagogue of the Jews" and taught, after which their hearers "searched the [Old Testament] Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

Acts 17:17 —In Athens, Paul reasoned in the synagogue with Jews and gentiles.

Acts 18:4 —In Corinth, Paul "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks."

Acts 18:19 —In Ephesus, Paul "entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews."

Acts 18:21 — Paul departed Ephesus, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem"—in accordance with God's command in Deuteronomy 16:16.

Acts 19:8 —After returning to Ephesus, Paul "went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months."

Acts 20:6 — Paul and his group "sailed away from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread," one of God's festivals commanded in Leviticus 23:6 and Deuteronomy 16:16.

Acts 20:16 — Paul changed his travel plans because "he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if

possible, on the Day of Pentecost," another of God's festivals.

Acts 21:20 —In Jerusalem, the apostles told Paul that "many thousands of Jews have believed [in Jesus Christ], and all of them are zealous for the law" (NIV). They saw no contradiction between Christianity and the laws they had always followed.

Acts 21:21-26 —To counter false accusations that he taught against the law and to show that he himself was "living in obedience to the law" (NIV), Paul joined with several men to be purified at the temple and to pay their expenses for their rites and offerings.

Acts 24:14 — Paul, in a legal hearing before the Roman governor Felix, stated that he worshiped the God of his fathers and believed "all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets"—the Old Testament.

Acts 25:8 —In a legal hearing before the next Roman governor, Festus, Paul said, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all."

Acts 27:9 —Luke noted that sailing in the Mediterranean Sea in late autumn "was now dangerous because the Fast"—a reference to the Day of Atonement, one of God's Holy Days (Leviticus 23:27)—"was already over."

Acts 28:17 —Speaking to the Jews in Rome where he was now a prisoner, Paul told them, "I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers."

The record from the book of Acts couldn't be clearer. Paul and the early Church were not at odds with the laws of the Old Testament!

What Did Paul Mean by 'Christ Is the End of the Law'?

In Romans 10:4, Paul's words are translated: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Regrettably, most translators render the Greek word telos simply as "end" instead of giving Paul's intended meaning of that word in this context. Reasoning incorrectly that faith makes the law void, they have adopted an illogical assumption that Paul plainly rejected in Romans 3:31. This passage reads: "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law."

To discover the proper translation of a word that can be used in more than one way, its context has to be understood correctly before any effort is made to determine the right nuance of meaning that the author intended. Here is a simple example. One might ask a college student, "To what end are you attending college?" The word "end" in that context would refer to the "objective" or "goal" the student has in mind. Receiving a degree would be only the "end result" of his college years of learning, not the end to his ability or desire to learn.

The Greek word telos, translated "end" in Romans 10:4, can convey variations in meaning, including "'the aim or purpose' of a thing" (Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "End, Ending"). This is very clear in the New King James Version's rendering of 1 Timothy 1:5, where telos is properly translated as purpose in the clause "the purpose of the commandment is love." In this same verse the NRSV translates telos as "aim" and the NIV renders it as "goal."

Paul uses telos in Romans 10:4 to convey that the objective or goal of the law—the "aim or purpose" of it—is to point us to the mind and character of Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:19; Philippians 2:5).

Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is a perfect replica of what God's law teaches. Pointing us to His character and work is the aim" of the law. Rendering of telos as "end" in Romans 10:4 distorts Paul's intended meaning—something Peter forcefully warns us not to do (2 Peter 3:15-16).

The Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15: What Was Decided?

Some people believe that the early Church's decision in Acts 15 freed Christians from the need to obey the laws revealed in the Old Testament. But is this the case? To understand what was really decided there, we need to look at and understand the historical, cultural and scriptural background.

From the beginning of gentile conversions, "certain men . . . from Judea" insisted that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Notice that they viewed circumcision as a matter of salvation. It was a huge issue to them!

So Paul took the matter before Church leadership to be officially resolved (verse 2). "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses'" (verse 5). By the "law of Moses" they meant the imperatives of the Sinai Covenant, which would have included perhaps some of its rituals and ceremonies—and definitely circumcision.

At the Church conference in Jerusalem, both Peter and Paul addressed the assembled elders. The matter of circumcision, Peter noted, had already been settled by God Himself (verses 7-9). Peter's testimony gave proof that God gave the Holy Spirit to gentiles who were not circumcised (Acts 10:44-48). As a result, they could only conclude that God does not require the circumcision of male gentile converts.

Paul and Barnabas then spoke, describing how God had performed miracles through them in calling gentiles into the Church (verse 12).

Four restrictions on new gentile converts

James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, then issued a concluding statement: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (verses 19-20, NIV).

Some people seize on these words to argue that nothing more was required of early Christians—that they (and we) need not keep other laws found in the Old Testament.

But does this view really make sense? James said nothing about murder, stealing, lying, taking God's name in vain or a host of other sins. By this rationale, should we conclude that Christians are now free to do these evil things? Of course not! So why, then, did James list only these four restrictions—"to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood"?

The link connecting each of these requirements is idolatry. Specifically, each was directly associated with the pagan forms of worship common in the areas from which God was calling

gentiles into the Church. Each also violated specific biblical commands (Exodus 20:2-6; Leviticus 20:10-20; Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 7:26-27).

It is evident, however, that the apostles also had another reason for singling out these links to idolatry. They wanted to make sure that new non-Jewish converts would have immediate access to learning the teachings of God's Word—the Holy Scriptures (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15).

Notice the reason James expressed for listing those particular prohibitions: "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21, NIV). The purpose for this somewhat puzzling concluding statement now becomes clear: The apostles wanted to ensure that every new gentile convert would be able to avail himself of that instruction as the words of Moses were "read . . . every Sabbath."

Access to the Scriptures

In that day no one had their own copies of the Bible. Scrolls were handwritten and enormously expensive. Only the very wealthy could afford any kind of personal library. The only places where one could hear the Bible regularly read was at the Jerusalem temple or in the Jewish synagogues that existed in larger cities of the Roman Empire.

By renouncing any associations with idolatry and choosing to worship only the true God of the Scriptures, these new gentile converts could attend the Jewish synagogue. There they would be able to learn the basic teachings of the Holy Scriptures every Sabbath. In areas where Christian congregations were not yet established, the synagogue was the only organized training center where the Scriptures could be learned.

Paul plainly confirms the importance of new converts being instructed from the Scriptures. In his letter to Timothy—a young minister who helped him serve these gentile converts—Paul makes the point that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable . . . for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

He even reminded the gentile converts in Rome that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). At that time, the only "Scripture" and "word of God" they knew was what we today call the Old Testament. The New Testament didn't yet exist.

Paul clearly expected his gentile converts to put effort into both hearing and learning the inspired Word of God. Yet when the Church first began accepting gentile converts, it did not yet have the capacity to instruct non-Jewish believers in the Scriptures in every city—especially in those cities having no Christian congregations.

But the Jews welcomed uncircumcised gentiles into the synagogue to learn God's truth—providing they made a commitment to serve only the true and living God of the Bible.

The New Testament shows that the earliest gentile converts quickly became familiar with those Scriptures. Because the Scriptures used by the Jews and Christians were exactly the same, the apostles were comfortable having new gentile believers join the Jews and Jewish Christians who attended synagogue services each Sabbath.

The Bible itself records that many gentiles first heard Paul's preaching in the synagogue where they were attending alongside the Jews (Acts 17:1-4, 10-12, 16-17). Both the synagogue and the Holy Scriptures were central to Paul's work in converting Jews and gentiles alike.

Both Paul and his converts regarded the Holy Scriptures—as taught by the Jews in the synagogues—as the foundation of their beliefs. Thus he did not always have to explain every detail of the way of life these new converts were to learn. When he was in a city for only a short time, Paul could concentrate his efforts on explaining the role and mission of Jesus Christ and then move on to another city.

He knew that gentile converts could continue receiving basic instruction in the Scriptures and God's way of life by attending the regular synagogue services. And the fact that, in his letters to gentile congregations, he quoted extensively from the same Scriptures used by the Jews provides clear evidence that all gentile converts had access to that instruction regardless of where they lived.

Jesus' Teaching on God's Law

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

Perhaps the most widespread controversies about the teachings of Jesus concern His attitude toward the laws of God recorded in the Old Testament.

The approach of most churches and denominations regarding Jesus is that He brought a new teaching differing considerably from the instructions of the Old Testament. The common view is that the teachings of Christ in the New Testament annulled and replaced the teachings of the Old Testament. But do they?

It doesn't ultimately matter what people say about Him. Nor does it really matter what interpretations they give of what He said. What truly matters is what He really said, and whether we're going to believe and accept what He said.

Clear statement in the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is a good place to begin. Since this is the longest recorded statement of Jesus Christ's teachings, we should expect to find in it His view toward the laws of God as recorded in the Old Testament. And indeed we do.

One of the reasons for some of Jesus' statements in the Sermon on the Mount is that—because His teaching was so different from that of the Pharisees and Sadducees—some people believed His intention was to subvert the authority of God's Word and substitute His own in its place.

But His real intention was to demonstrate that many of the things the Pharisees and Sadducees taught were contrary to the original teachings of the Torah (or Law) of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. Jesus refuted the erroneous ideas people had formed regarding Him with three emphatic declarations about the law. Let's look at them.

"I did not come to destroy but to fulfill"

Jesus explains His view of the law very early in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

So immediately we see that Jesus had no intention of destroying the law. He even tells us to not even think such a thing. Far from being antagonistic to the Old Testament Scriptures, He said He had come to fulfill "the Law and the Prophets" and proceeded to confirm their authority. "The Law and the Prophets" was a term commonly used for the Old Testament Scriptures (compare Matthew 7:12).

"The Law" referred to the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses in which God's laws were written down. "The Prophets" referred not only to the writings of the biblical prophets, but

also to the historical books of what came to be known as the Old Testament.

What did Jesus mean when He spoke of fulfilling the law?

Regrettably, the meaning of " fulfilling the law" has been twisted by many who claim the name of Jesus but don't really understand what He taught. They say that since Jesus said He would fulfill the law, we no longer need to keep it.

Another view of "fulfilling the law" is that Jesus "filled full" what was lacking in the law—that is, He completed it, partly canceling it and partly adding to it, forming what is sometimes referred to as "Christ's law" or "New Testament teaching."

The implication of this view is that the New Testament brought a change in the requirements for salvation and that the laws given in the Old Testament are obsolete. But do either of these views accurately reflect what Jesus meant?

Jesus' view of fulfilling the law

The Greek word pleroo, translated "fulfill" in Matthew 5:17, means "to make full, to fill, to fill up . . . to fill to the full" or "to render full, i.e. to complete" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2002, Strong's number 4137).

In other words, Jesus said He came to complete the law and make it perfect. How? By showing the spiritual intent and application of God's law. His meaning is clear from the remainder of the chapter, where He showed the spiritual intent of specific commandments.

Some distort the meaning of "fulfill" to have Jesus saying, "I did not come to destroy the law, but to end it by fulfilling it." This is inconsistent with His own words. Through the remainder of the chapter, He showed that the spiritual intent of the law made it more broadly applicable, not that it was annulled or no longer necessary.

Jesus, by explaining, expanding and exemplifying God's law, fulfilled a prophecy of the Messiah found in Isaiah 42:21: "The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will exalt the law, and make it honorable." The Hebrew word gadal, translated "exalt" or "magnify" (KJV), literally means "to be or become great" (William Wilson, Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies, "Magnify").

Jesus Christ did exactly that, showing the holy, spiritual intent, purpose and scope of God's law through His teachings and manner of life. He met the law's requirements by obeying it perfectly in thought and deed, both in the letter and in the intent of the heart.

All will be fulfilled

The second major statement given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in the exact same

context, makes it even clearer that He did not come to destroy, rescind, nullify or abrogate the law: "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18).

With these words, Jesus likened the continuance of the law to the permanence of heaven and earth. He is saying that God's spiritual laws are immutable, inviolable and indestructible. They can only be fulfilled, never abrogated.

We should note that in this verse a different Greek word is used for "fulfilled": ginomai, meaning "to become, i.e. to come into existence . . . to come to pass, happen" or "to be made, done, finished" (Thayer's, Strong's number 1096).

Until the ultimate completion of God's plan to glorify humanity in His Kingdom comes to pass—that is, as long as there are still fleshly human beings—the physical codification of God's law in Scripture is necessary. This, Jesus explained, is as certain as the continued existence of the universe.

His servants must keep the law

The third statement of Jesus, quoted earlier in chapter 2, pronounces that our fate rests on our attitude toward and treatment of God's holy law. Again, "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least [by those] in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great [by those] in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19).

The "by those" is added for clarification, since, as explained in other passages, those who persist in lawbreaking and teach others to break God's law will not themselves be in the Kingdom at all.

Jesus makes it very clear that those who follow Him and aspire to His Kingdom have a perpetual obligation to obey and uphold God's law. He is saying that we cannot diminish the law of God by even a jot or tittle—the equivalent in our modern alphabet of the crossing of a "t" or the dotting of an "i."

The value He places on the commandments of God is also unmistakable—as well as the high esteem toward the law He requires from all those who teach in His name. His disapproval falls on those who slight the least of God's commandments, and His honor will be bestowed on those who teach and obey God's commandments.

Since Jesus obeyed the commandments of God, it follows that His servants, too, must keep the same commandments and teach others to do the same (1 John 2:2-6). It is in this way that the true ministers of Christ are to be identified—by their following the example He set for them (John 13:15).

Must exceed the scribes and Pharisees

With the next statement in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus leaves no doubt as to what He

meant in the previous three declarations.

He meant without question for His disciples to obey God's law—and He was requiring them to obey according to a standard that went beyond anything they'd heard before. "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

Who were the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes were the most renowned teachers of the law —the interpreters of the law, the learned men, the experts.

The Pharisees, a related group, were commonly viewed as the most exemplary models of Judaism. They formed a sect of Judaism that established a code of morals and rituals more rigid than that spelled out in the law of Moses, basing much of their practices on years of traditions. The scribes and Pharisees were both highly strict and highly respected in Judaism (Acts 26:5).

While the scribes were the experts, the Pharisees professed the purest practice of righteousness. So when Jesus stated that one's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, this was a startling declaration!

The Pharisees were looked up to as those who had attained the very pinnacle of personal righteousness, and the common people supposed that such heights of spirituality were far beyond their reach. But Jesus asserted that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees wasn't enough to entitle them to enter the Kingdom of which He spoke! What hope, then, did others have?

Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy

In actual fact, there was a real problem with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The heart of the matter was that their righteousness was defective in that it was external only. They appeared to obey the law to those who observed them, but broke God's law inwardly, where it couldn't be seen by others.

Notice Jesus' scathing denunciation of their hypocrisy in making a show of religion: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence . . . For you . . . indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness . . . You also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:25-28).

These self-appointed religious teachers emphasized minor aspects of the law while neglecting more important issues. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (verse 23).

Jesus was concerned that every part of the righteous requirement be obeyed, and angry that they were blind to the "weightier" parts—the major spiritual aspects—of the law.

While they were fastidious with their ceremonial traditions, at the same time they took liberties

to disobey God's direct commands. In some situations they actually elevated their traditions above the clear commands of God (Matthew 15:1-9).

Behind their actions was the base motive of self-exaltation and self-interest. They went public with what should have been their more private devotions toward God—prayer, fasting and giving of alms—all so they could be seen and thought of by others as righteous (Matthew 6:1-6; 23:5-7).

Religious leaders did not keep the spirit of God's law

Immediately after His statement that He had no intention of doing away with God's law, Jesus proceeded to give examples of the traditions and teachings of the Jewish religious leaders that completely missed the point or even contradicted the spiritual intent of God's laws.

The first example He gave was the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not murder." All that the Pharisees understood about this commandment was that the act of murder was prohibited. Jesus taught what should have been obvious, that the intent of the Sixth Commandment was not just to prohibit the literal act of murder, but every evil attitude of heart and mind that led to murder—including unjust anger and contemptuous words (Matthew 5:21-26).

He did likewise with their narrow view of the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." The Pharisees of the day understood the physical act of sexual relations with a woman outside of marriage to be sin. They should also have known, as in the case of the Sixth Commandment, that lust for another woman was sinful because the one lusting had already broken the commandment in his heart.

These are examples of the "righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" that Jesus characterized as making the outside of the cup and dish clean, while on the inside remaining "full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25, NRSV).

Jesus instructed His disciples that God's law must indeed be obeyed outwardly, but it must also be obeyed in the spirit and intent of the heart. When Jesus taught such heartfelt obedience to God's laws, He was faithful to what the Old Testament taught: "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a time when God would establish a new covenant in which God promised to "put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). God's original intent for His law was that people would observe it from their hearts (Deuteronomy 5:29). The failure of human beings to obey God's law in the "inward being" (Psalm 51:6, NRSV) inevitably led to outward disobedience.

Jesus did not change the law

Jesus prefaced His contrast of the scribes' and Pharisees' narrow interpretation of the law with its true spiritual intent using the words, "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . ." (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Some erroneously think Jesus' intention was to contrast His own teaching with that of Moses and thereby declare Himself as the only true authority. They assume that Jesus was either opposed to the Mosaic law or was modifying it in some way.

But it's hard to imagine that Jesus, just after delivering the most solemn and emphatic proclamation of the permanence of God's law and emphasizing His own high regard for it, would now undermine the authority of that law by other pronouncements. Jesus wasn't inconsistent; He honored and upheld the law in all His statements.

In this passage He is not pitting Himself against the Mosaic law, nor is He claiming a superior spirituality. What He was doing was refuting the wrong interpretations perpetuated by the scribes and Pharisees.

This is why He declared that one's righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was restoring, in the minds of His listeners, the Mosaic precepts to their original place, purity and power.

It should also be obvious that because the same God is the Author of Old and New Covenant alike, there can be no vital conflict between them, and that the fundamental laws of morality underlying both must be and are in full accord. God tells us in Malachi 3:6, "I am the LORD, I do not change . . ."

Jesus and the Sabbath

Among those who claim to follow Jesus, no biblical command has aroused as much controversy as the Fourth Commandment– God's instruction to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8-11). Here in particular we find that people's interpretations of Jesus' teaching are all over the map.

Some argue that Jesus annulled all of the Ten Commandments but that nine were reinstituted in the New Testament–all except the Sabbath. Some believe that Jesus replaced the Sabbath with Himself, and that He is now our "rest." Some believe that no Sabbath at all is needed now, that we can rest or worship on any day or at any time we choose.

Regardless of which argument one uses, an overwhelming portion of traditional Christianity believes that Sunday, the first day of the week, has replaced the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week.

Can we find support for these views in Christ's practice or teaching? In light of Jesus' clear teaching on the permanence of God's laws, what do we find when it comes to His attitude toward the Sabbath day?

In studying the Gospels, one of the first things we should notice is that Jesus' custom was to attend the synagogue for worship on God's Sabbaths (Luke 4:16). This was His regular practice. On this particular occasion, He even announced His mission as Messiah to those in the synagogue that day.

Interestingly, we later find that Paul's custom was also to worship and teach in the synagogues on the Sabbath day (Acts 17:2-3). Neither he nor Jesus ever so much as hinted to their listeners

that they needn't be there or that they should worship on a different day!

Confrontations over how, not whether, to keep the Sabbath

Where many people jump to wrong conclusions about Jesus and the Sabbath is in His confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees. Yet these confrontations were never over whether to keep the Sabbath—only over how it should be kept. There is a crucial difference between the two!

For example, Jesus boldly challenged the Jews concerning their interpretation of Sabbath observance by performing healings on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6).

According to the Pharisees, rendering medical attention to someone, unless it were a matter of life and death, was prohibited on the Sabbath. And since none of these healings involved a life-and- death situation, they thought Jesus was breaking the Sabbath.

But as the Savior, Jesus understood the purpose of the Sabbath, that it was a perfectly appropriate time to bring His message of healing, hope and redemption to humanity and to live that message through His actions.

To make His point, Jesus asked the Pharisees the question, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4).

He exposed their hypocrisy in that they saw nothing wrong with working to rescue an animal that fell into a pit on the Sabbath day, or watering an animal on that day, yet they were condemning Him for helping a human being—whose worth was far greater than that of any animal—on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15-17; Matthew 12:10-14).

He was rightfully angry at their inability to see that they placed their own traditions and interpretations over the true purpose of Sabbath observance (Mark 3:5). Yet they were so spiritually blind that they hated Him for exposing their distortions of God's commands (verse 6).

On one occasion Jesus' disciples, as they walked through a field on the Sabbath day, picked handfuls of grain so they would have something to eat. The disciples weren't harvesting the field; they were merely grabbing a quick snack to take care of their hunger.

But the Pharisees insisted this was not lawful. Jesus used an example from Scripture to show that the spirit and intent of the law were not broken and that God's law allowed for mercy (Mark 2:23-26).

In this context Jesus gives the true purpose of the Sabbath. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," He said (verse 27). The Pharisees had reversed the priorities of the law of God. They had added so many meticulous regulations and traditions to the Sabbath commandment that trying to keep it as they demanded had become an enormous burden for people rather than the blessing God had intended it to be (see Isaiah 58:13-14).

Jesus then claimed to have authority to say how the Sabbath should be observed: "Therefore,

the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (verse 28).

Judaism forsook Moses, Christianity forsook Christ

When it comes to Jesus and the law, we have to conclude that the "Christian" religion has let us down by not holding to the original teachings of Christ, who Himself held to the original teachings of the Old Testament scriptures. And as the teachings of Jewish religious leaders corrupted Moses, so did later teachers of Christ—that is, false teachers claiming to represent Him—corrupt His teachings. In reality, Jesus and Moses agreed.

Let's ask a question here. If Jesus were here today, which day would He observe as the Sabbath? It would be the day commanded in the Ten Commandments, the seventh day.

Jesus kept the law and expected His disciples to do the same. He made clear His attitude about anyone diminishing one iota from the law. Anyone not keeping it is only using the good name of Christ without doing what He said.

He warns us: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

So where does this lead us? It leads us to the conclusion that not all churches claiming to represent Christ really represent Him accurately. Like so many of the ancient Pharisees, they have accumulated traditions that lead them astray.

Jesus often pointed out that His teaching was based in the Old Testament Scriptures. When others challenged Him concerning His teaching He responded, "Have you not read . . . ?" before pointing His challengers to the Scriptures that supported what He had said (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31).

Those who say that Jesus departed from the authority of the Old Testament scriptures are simply wrong. In this chapter we have demonstrated that the Jewish religious leaders of His own day and most professing Christians today are incorrect in their assessment of Jesus' teachings. Jesus faithfully taught the written word of the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is consistent, "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). He has not changed His view of God's law!

Other Important Ways Jesus Fulfilled the Law

The law required perfect obedience and pronounced a death sentence on any who broke it. Paul tells us that "the wages of sin is death . . ." (Romans 6:23).

Consider for a moment the penalty that each of us brought on ourselves by sin. It isn't purgatory or hell, or some other place or state of being or consciousness. It is death– eternal oblivion, a nothingness, a total blotting out of existence from which we could never escape were it not for God's promise of the resurrection.

Paul continues in Romans 6:23, ". . . But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Since we all sin, the law can only demand our death. It has no provision for giving us eternal life. So how could anyone hope for life beyond the grave?

Jesus also fulfilled the law in the sense that He met the law's requirement by paying the penalty each of us incurred for disobedience, which is death. Jesus, who never sinned, never brought on Himself the death penalty that was required by the law. As our perfect sacrifice for sin, He was able to satisfy the law's demands that required our death. Thus He "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). Having "washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5), Jesus makes it possible for us to receive God's gift of eternal life.

The "Law" section of the Bible, the five books of Moses, contains several kinds of laws. In addition to what we might call the moral laws that govern human behavior (such as the Ten Commandments), this section also contained various sacrificial laws requiring sacrifices for sin. Of themselves these laws and sacrifices could never remove the death penalty for sin (Hebrews 10:1-4).

"Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me . . .' . . . It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . .When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (verses 5, 10, 12, 14, NRSV).

What this is telling us is that Jesus fulfilled everything prescribed in the offerings for sin in the law of sacrifices. Jesus upheld the entire law by becoming the sacrifice for sin.

If Christ had not presented Himself as an offering for sin, the sacrifices that foreshadowed the "single offering for sins" would have constituted an unfulfilled prophecy or pledge, because they all pointed to Him.

Jesus said He came not to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. He did so on several different levels and in several different ways. He showed the full spiritual intent of the law, living it perfectly as an example for us. The prophets had previously announced His person, His mission and many details of His birth, life, death and resurrection–which He fulfilled. The sacrifices of the law foreshadowed His sacrificial death for the sins of all mankind–which He alone could fulfill.

What Jesus was saying is that the Old Testament in all its parts and elements—moral and prophetic—referred to Himself and applied to Him. He fulfilled all aspects of what the Law and Prophets required, substantiating them and making good what they demanded and announced.

Does the New Covenant Abolish the Commandments?

The Bible tells us that Christ came as the Mediator of a better covenant (Hebrews 8:6). The popular belief that the New Covenant abolishes God's law reflects a misunderstanding of both covenants. God tells us that He altered the original covenant and made "a better covenant, which was established on better promises" (verse 6). But it was not established on different laws. The law stayed the same.

There was, however, a weakness, or fault, in the original covenant. That fault was with the people, not with the law. "Because finding fault with them, He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah'" (verse 8). It was because the people "did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD" (verse 9).

In the Old Covenant, God wrote the law on tablets of stone. It was external, not part of the thinking and motives of the people. It was in their literature but not in their hearts. In the New Covenant, God writes the law in the minds and hearts of His people (Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33-34).

To enable people to internalize His law—to love it and obey it eagerly and willingly—God makes this promise: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). God's Spirit enables His people to obey His laws!

People lacking the Holy Spirit are incapable of wholehearted obedience. Why? "For the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit itself to God's law, for it is unable to do so. For those whose lives are in the flesh are unable to please God" (Romans 8:7-8, Holman Christian Standard Bible).

This is why the Old Covenant and the New Covenant differ. Paul explains that "what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh" God has accomplished by sending Jesus, who overcame the flesh and "condemned sin [lawlessness] in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4; see also 1 John 3:4).

The International Critical Commentary, in reference to Romans 8:4, says: "God's purpose in 'condemning' sin was that His law's requirement might be fulfilled in us, that is, that His law might be established in the sense of at last being truly and sincerely obeyed—the fulfillment of the promises of Jer[emiah] 31:33 and Ezek[iel] 36:26.1."

In a footnote to Jeremiah 31:33-34 the commentary explains that this passage "is often misunderstood as a promise of a new law to take the place of the old or else as a promise of a religion without law at all. But the new thing promised in v. 33 is, in fact, neither a new law nor freedom from law, but a sincere inward desire and determination on the part of God's people to

obey the law already given to them."

The following passages in the New Testament confirm, either explicitly or by example, that Jesus and the apostles viewed the Ten Commandments as necessary for true Christian living.

• First Commandment: Matthew 4:10; 22:37-38.

• Second Commandment: 1 John 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 10:7, 14; Ephesians 5:5.

• Third Commandment: Matthew 5:33-34; 7:21-23; Luke 11:2; 1 Timothy 6:1.

• Fourth Commandment: Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; Hebrews 4:4, 9.

• Fifth Commandment: Matthew 15:3-6; 19:17-19; Ephesians 6:2-3.

• Sixth Commandment: Matthew 5:21-22; 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:19-21; James 2:10-12.

• Seventh Commandment: Matthew 5:27-28; 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 10:8; Ephesians 5:5; Galatians 5:19-21; James 2:10-12.

• Eighth Commandment: Matthew 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; Ephesians 4:28.

• Ninth Commandment: Matthew 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; Colossians 3:9; Ephesians 4:25.

• Tenth Commandment: Luke 12:15; Romans 7:7; 13:9; Ephesians 5:3, 5.

The 'New' Part of Jesus Christ's 'New Commandment'

The night before He was crucified, Jesus told His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34, NASB).

Did Jesus replace God's previous commandments with just this one "new commandment"? Many teach that is exactly what He meant. But their reasoning doesn't take into account all that Jesus said. Most of what He said was not new.

Moses had written almost the same words many centuries earlier (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus merely added some words that Moses could not have written because Jesus had not yet come. Those new words spoken by Jesus were "even as I have loved you"—referring to the perfect example of love He had set for them!

His example raised the bar of loving character higher than it had ever been before. He loved us to the point that He gave His own life for us. He explained—just two chapters later—"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

But Jesus also illustrated through His example that love and obedience must go together. He explained, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

We fulfill Jesus' new commandment when we love each other to the same extent He did—by being willing to lay down our lives for others' sake. That is the kind of love Jesus wants all of His true disciples to practice from the heart. And that is the point He was making in His "new" commandment.

Confusion Over Legalism: What It Is and Isn't

The religious authorities who accused Jesus Christ of breaking the Sabbath have been described as having a legalistic approach. But what does the term "legalism" mean? A dictionary definition of legalism is "a strict, literal or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code."

A popular meaning attached to the word today is that any form of biblical law-keeping is legalism and therefore to be avoided. The word is used pejoratively, especially against such practices as keeping the Sabbath or adhering to other laws given in the Old Testament.

However, this use of the word is incorrect. It is not legalistic to obey God's laws correctly. To be legalistic is to misuse God's laws in a way never intended.

Pharisees' interpretations undermined God's law

The Pharisees, an excessively strict branch of Judaism whose religious interpretations dominated popular thinking at the time of Christ, were examples of this. They added many of their own humanly devised rules and regulations to God's laws, which had the effect of misrepresenting and misapplying them.

Their added interpretations of God's laws so distorted the original purpose that they rendered them ineffective (Matthew 15:6), nullifying them. By following the Pharisees' interpretations and edicts, the people were no longer following God's law (John 7:19).

This mistaken view of God's law led many to reject Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, even though that very law had prophesied of Him (John 5:39-40; Luke 24:44).

This was why Christ so strongly condemned the lack of understanding and hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His time. He taught a return to the correct teaching and practice of God's laws according to their original intent and purpose, and also that He was the promised Messiah.

Paul condemned perversion of law

The apostle Paul also wrote extensively against those who would pervert the proper use of God's law. This is particularly apparent in the book of Galatians. What Paul addressed was not the correct keeping of God's law, which he himself elsewhere upheld (Romans 3:31; 7:12, 14, 22, 25), but a claim that justification (the forgiveness and restoration of a sinner to a state of righteousness) could be achieved by circumcision and strict observance of the law.

Some false teachers (Galatians 2:4; 5:10, 12; 6:12-13) subverted the Galatian churches by wrongly insisting that circumcision and the keeping of the law were sufficient requirements for justification and salvation, apart from faith in and from Jesus Christ.

Paul condemned this erroneous teaching, noting that obedience to the law had never made

eternal life possible (Galatians 3:21). He made it clear that justification—being made righteous in God's eyes and thus gaining access to eternal life—is only available through Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16; 3:1-3, 10-11, 22; 5:1-4).

Paul made it clear that forgiveness of sin requires a sacrifice, and even the strictest observance of the law cannot remove the need for that sacrifice.

However, the law of God remains the righteous standard by which all mankind will be judged (James 2:8, 12). The law is not annulled or abolished by faith in Christ (Romans 3:31), as many falsely believe. Instead, said Paul, the law's proper use is established by faith.

When Solomon concluded that the whole duty of man is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), he expressed the enduring purpose of God for all mankind. The apostle John agreed when he concluded that, if we love God, we will keep His commandments (1 John 5:3).

Jesus told the woman taken in adultery to "sin no more" (John 8:11)—in other words, to uphold and live by God's law! Jesus told the rich young man, who came to Him asking what he could do to have eternal life, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments"(Matthew 19:17).

Biblical examples of legalism

So what does the Bible tell us about legalism?

To substitute humanly devised laws for God's laws, as the Pharisees did, is legalism.

To rely upon the keeping of any law to make one righteous in God's eyes, instead of faith in Christ, is legalism.

If all one focuses on is obedience to law apart from the motivation of pleasing God, loving God and loving neighbor, this distorts the purpose of the law (Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 13:10) and is legalism.

If we believe that the keeping of God's law can earn our salvation as our reward, we are guilty of legalism.

Technical obedience, or strict obedience to the exact letter of the law while searching for ways to get around the underlying purpose and intent of the law, is legalism.

Proper obedience is not legalism

But Jesus Christ's teachings and the remainder of the Bible make one thing perfectly clear: Proper obedience to the law of God is not legalism.

After conversion, a Christian is given a much fuller understanding of the purpose and intent of God's law. He understands the importance of having faith in the person and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is given a more complete understanding of why he is to be obedient. But it remains for him to obey. That is not legalism.

To obey God's biblical commands in a proper attitude, such as His command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, is not legalism. Don't allow anyone to beguile you with such a false notion, which is itself a contradiction of Jesus Christ's own command (Matthew 5:19).

Does God Set Conditions on His Gift of Eternal Life?

In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul explains that "by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Eternal life comes as a result of God's grace. It is His gift, unearned and undeserved on our part. No one will ever be able to boast that he or she has earned or deserves the gift of eternal life.

But can we do things—or not do things—that will disqualify us from receiving that wonderful gift?

If there is an authority on receiving eternal life, it has to be Jesus Christ. After all, He is the one through whom we receive it.

In Hebrews 5:8-9, Jesus is called the author of our salvation: "Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him."

Since salvation is God's gift, what does this passage mean when it speaks of "eternal salvation to all who obey Him"? If we must do something to receive God's gift of salvation, how can it be a gift?

Gifts can have conditions

The fact is, the Bible shows that God sets certain conditions for receiving salvation. Some conditions enable us to receive that gift, and other conditions disqualify us from receiving it.

To use an analogy, if someone offered to send you a $100 bill if you would send him a stamped, self-addressed envelope, he would be offering you a gift. If you failed to send the envelope, you would not receive the gift. You might complain, but you still would not receive the gift because you had not met the conditions. On the other hand, if you sent the required envelope and received the $100 bill, you did not earn the gift. You simply met the necessary conditions. The fact that conditions are attached makes it no less a gift.

Since Jesus is the author of our salvation, let's examine a few of His statements that tell us what we must do to receive that gift.

What must we do?

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." He made it clear that merely acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Master—saying "Lord, Lord"—is not sufficient. To inherit the Kingdom, we must do something. We must do the will of the Father, as He clearly

stated.

Jesus wants us to understand that there is more to receiving eternal life than just mental acceptance. Our conviction that He is our Savior must be more than just a warm, comforting thought or intellectual concept. Jesus warns that simply calling on His name or recognizing Him as "Lord" is not enough.

At one point a wealthy young man asked Jesus how he could receive eternal life. "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" the man asked (Matthew 19:16). Christ's reply, in verse 17, might shock some who think obedience to God's law is unnecessary. Jesus responded, "If you want
to enter into life, keep the commandments."

Jesus didn't answer that nothing is required other than believing in God or in Him. He told the young man that he must obey the commandments of God to receive the gift of eternal life.

As the apostle James points out, belief is pointless unless it is backed up by action and obedience: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble" (James 2:19).

He goes on to explain that faith—belief and trust in God—and obedience go hand in hand: "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (verses 20-22).

James thus explained that works of obedience as a result of our faith maintain our relationship with God and lead to greater faith and obedience, as God requires.

Baptism and laying on of hands

Jesus gave another condition for God's gift of eternal life in Mark 16:16: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Water baptism—by full immersion—is a symbolic act representing the death of our old self and the beginning of a new life of serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23).

Baptism is also followed by the laying on of hands, which allows us to receive God's Holy Spirit and truly belong to Him (Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as instructed, we fail to meet—whether knowingly or unknowingly—His prerequisites for receiving His gift of salvation. To those who would brush aside these and other plain biblical instructions Jesus replies, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).

In Matthew 10:22 Jesus listed another condition we must meet to receive God's gift of salvation: "He who endures to the end will be saved." We can lose out on salvation if we fail to endure to the end. Once we have committed ourselves to obeying God and surrendering ourselves to Him, we must stay the course to the end and not look back (Luke 9:62; 1 Corinthians 9:27).

Free, but not cheap

You may have heard the expression, "Salvation is free, but it isn't cheap." God's gift of life to us cost Jesus Christ His life. He, the very Son of God, willingly surrendered His life so that we might receive God's wonderful gift of eternal life.

But He expects us to surrender our lives in return. "If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me" (Luke 14:26-27, NLT).

Our love for and commitment to Jesus Christ and God the Father must be more important to us than any other relationship. Each of us must be willing to bear his "cross," to faithfully follow Jesus even through life's most difficult challenges.

Verses 28-33 carry that thought, warning us to consider carefully that accepting the gift of eternal life comes at the highest cost we can imagine. "So no one can become my disciple without giving up. everything for me" (verse 33, NLT).

As Jesus gave His life for us, we must be willing to give our lives to follow Him.

All the World Under the New Covenant

"All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name" (Psalm 86:9, NRSV).

When God confirmed the Sinai Covenant with ancient Israel, He summarized how He wanted the people to respond: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

That vital priority has never changed. Concerning the New Covenant mediated by Jesus Christ, God promised, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them" (Hebrews 10:16; quoting from Jeremiah 31:33). The ultimate intent of God's master plan is to change the hearts of all peoples so He can give them His gift of eternal life.

The New Covenant promises are already available to people from all nations through Jesus Christ. But only a "little flock" (Luke 12:32) is responding through real repentance at this time (for an explanation of how that "little flock" has survived until this day.

At Christ's return, when He assumes the office of King of Kings, a crucial aspect of His mission will be to lead all people on earth to repentance. His direct intervention in human affairs will begin at a time when mankind is engulfed in the worst conflict the world has ever known.

Jesus personally foretold this unprecedented period of human suffering: "For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (Matthew 24:21-22, NIV).

That distressful time will be relatively short. Then, "immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:29-30).

King of all the earth

At His return there will be "loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'" (Revelation 11:15). He will start changing the behavior and attitudes of people in every nation.

Once they repent—by acknowledging their transgressions of God's law and turning to seek Him—

they will receive the Spirit of God as promised in the New Covenant. This will enable them finally to begin obeying God from the heart.

However, bringing all nations to repentance won't happen overnight. It may take several years.

One of Jesus' first tasks will be to gather the modern descendants of ancient Israel back to the Holy Land. There He will transform them into a model nation for all other nations to copy. "It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people . . . and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isaiah 11:11-12).

To that restored Israel He promises, "Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart"(Jeremiah 24:7).

The fruit of peaceful, law-abiding people

This changed heart will produce lasting results. "They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands.

"They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them" (Isaiah 65:21-23, NIV).

Gradually, all of mankind will begin to enjoy the fruits of peace. Notice how the other nations, seeing these wonderful benefits, will begin to respond:

"And it will come about in the last days that . . . many nations will come and say, 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For from Zion will go forth the law, even the word of the Lord from Jerusalem . . . and never again will they train for war" (Micah 4:1-3, NASB).

At that time the fruit of God's laws being written in the hearts and minds of all peoples will become apparent. By demonstrating the benefits of obeying God's commandments from the heart—by the example of an entire nation— Jesus Christ will be able to spread peace to the whole earth.

"This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, "Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going." And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him'" (Zechariah 8:20-22, NIV).

What a different world that will be from today's world, where the law of God is mostly spurned. It will be united under the rule of Jesus Christ, who explained to one young man searching for eternal life, "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments" (Matthew 19:17, NIV). That message has never changed. It is the message of the New Covenant. God's law will then be

written in the hearts of all those willing and wanting to receive God's gift of eternal life.

Make it personal

Knowing what God has in store for the future, why not take a long look at your relationship with Him and His Son Jesus Christ? Are you willing to let Him write His law in your heart?

When God opens one's mind to understand His ways, He holds that person responsible for what he or she knows and does. "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

Once we understand what sin is, God expects us to begin changing our lives. As the apostle Paul put it, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30, NIV).

When examining ourselves, it is comforting to remember these verses: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly [in heartfelt prayer] to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Those who sincerely seek the help of Jesus Christ have the promise that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

With that assurance you can look forward to receiving another wonderful promise: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6).

You can be one of those called to assist Jesus Christ in writing the law of God in the hearts of all of mankind. All of this is possible if only you will become a part of those who, as James 1:22 puts it, are "doers of the word, and not hearers only."

Liberty Through God's Law

Today's democratic system of government in Western nations is based on liberty that is both defined and guaranteed by law. Biblical freedom or liberty is no different. Without law, there can be no effective or lasting liberty.

A society without law inevitably succumbs either to total anarchy or to an oppressive dictatorship. Untarnished law, willingly obeyed, is the glue that cements stability and assures fairness for all. Supreme liberty is possible exclusively through laws that are equitable and a citizenry that willingly submits to them from the heart.

This is the goal that God has committed Himself to achieve, though with a system of laws far better than anything human beings have ever devised. He already has revealed laws to humankind that are equitable and sound—laws that, if obeyed by all, would bring freedom from suffering. Currently, He is in the process of writing those laws into the hearts and minds of a called and chosen few.

At the return of Jesus Christ, He will expand that effort to include all of humankind. In the final judgment He will sort those who willingly respond to Him from those who refuse to give up their self-centered attitudes and behavior (Matthew 25:31-46).

Those who internalize His laws, allowing them to be "written" into their hearts and minds, will receive eternal life. Those who totally reject the rule of divine law will be destroyed forever in the final lake of fire (Hebrews 10:26-31; Revelation 20:15).

The end result will be an immortal family named after God (Ephesians 3:14-15). His sons and daughters (2 Corinthians 6:18), who love one another from the heart, will indeed have been "delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

No longer imprisoned by physical limitations, they will be free from physical suffering and even from death. And in living forever by God's law of love, they will experience true joy and happiness for all eternity.

A Covenant of Marriage

Few people realize that the Old Covenant was essentially a marriage covenant—by which God "was a husband" to Israel (Jeremiah 31:32). In this covenant, Israel, the wife, had agreed to submit to God and obey His laws. But she did not. Israel's adultery with foreign gods was so heinous that God divorced His people except for a few who still tried to serve Him (Jeremiah 3:8, 14; Isaiah 50:1).

The people never had the right heart and mind to obey (Deuteronomy 5:29; Romans 8:7). This fault of the people, the book of Hebrews explains, was the problem with the Old Covenant—and the reason a New Covenant was necessary (Hebrews 8:7-8). The book of Hebrews actually quotes this important passage from Jeremiah twice (verses 8-13; 10:16-17).

What, then, is the New Covenant? It is basically a new marriage contract God lays out with Israel and Judah.

A marriage proposal from Jesus Christ

We see this reflected in Christ's words and actions on the evening before His death. During the last Passover meal He shared with His disciples, Jesus introduced the symbols of broken bread to represent the sacrifice of His broken body and wine to symbolize His shed blood—His death. "Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins'" (Matthew 26:27-28).

Jesus was explaining that the shedding of His blood as a sacrifice for sin was required to make the New Covenant possible. Without it, there was no way to atone for the sins of all who would participate in the covenant.

Notice further that Jesus was here initiating the New Covenant with His disciples. This can be confusing since the setting of Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant with Israel and Judah is after Christ's return to earth (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Furthermore, the "marriage of the Lamb" likewise does not occur until His return (Revelation 19:6-9)—and this is clearly referring to Christ's marriage to the Church.

It helps when we understand that God's Church is spiritual Israel (Romans 2:28-29)—a pioneer in the relationship God announced through Jeremiah. However, this does not explain why the Church is under the terms of the New Covenant marriage today even though the marriage does not take place until Christ's return.

Biblical marriage customs

To understand, we must know something about marriage customs in biblical times. Couples initially became engaged—betrothed—with a customary shared cup of wine. This betrothal was not like engagements today, which can easily be broken off. A Jewish betrothal was a binding

contract with obligations on both parties. It required a divorce to break it.

During this betrothal period the couple was already considered married and regarded as husband and wife. We see this reflected in Matthew 1:18-20 where Joseph and Mary are "betrothed," but already referred to as husband and wife. Breaking that betrothal contract would have required a divorce (verse 19, NIV).

Although considered husband and wife, the couple did not live together as husband and wife until after a public wedding celebration, usually some months after the betrothal agreement. As happens today, the couple would use this betrothal period to prepare for their actual wedding and subsequent life together.

With this as background, we can better understand the New Covenant relationship. Jesus initiated the New Covenant—He proposed marriage, we might say—to His true followers. As we've seen, the Old Covenant arrangement was not good enough. Even Christ's disciples, the most faithful people of His day, were still carnal and condemned because of their sins. They needed to be changed into a new, spiritually converted people to enter into this new relationship with Jesus Christ.

This was accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection and their receiving God's Holy Spirit, which enabled this spiritual transformation to begin (Romans 7:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:39; Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:16-17; Romans 8:5-10). This also made them the Church of God, the true "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16)—that is, the faithful remnant of Israel according to God's grace (compare Romans 11:1-5).

Having agreed to the New Covenant, the Church is now betrothed to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). It is under the terms of the New Covenant but still awaiting the coming fullness of the New Covenant marriage to begin at "the marriage of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:6-9). Being betrothed to Him, the members of His Church submit to His loving leadership and guidance as the head of that Church (Ephesians 5:22-32), preparing for an eternity with Him.

The Church has grown to include more people since that original agreement with Christ's disciples. To be part of that Church and part of that covenant agreement requires partaking of the symbols of the New Covenant each year, reaffirming the terms of the marriage contract—a commitment to obey God and the acceptance of Christ's shed blood to atone for any failure to obey.

All mankind brought into that relationship

At Christ's return, those who are betrothed to Him prior to that time will then go through an actual wedding ceremony and celebration, as mentioned in Revelation 19. Glorified with spirit bodies, they will be perfect and will never sin again, having God's laws ingrained perfectly into their character—continuing in unbroken oneness with Jesus Christ thereafter.

This is the culmination and fullness of the New Covenant marriage—yet God intends to offer this marriage relationship to all human beings. All who will ultimately agree to surrender themselves and be spiritually transformed in the same way can receive it.

When Jesus returns and joins into the fullness of marriage with His Church, He will then also

extend His engagement proposal to all mankind. Yet the covenant is still with Israel (Jeremiah 31:31), since all must become spiritual Israelites to participate in it. Eventually, all who ultimately choose to serve God and continue in His covenant will be changed into spirit to enter into the fullness of the New Covenant.

And as all of mankind is brought into this relationship, peace will extend to encompass the earth —all under the rule of Christ and His perfected saints, the glorified spiritual Israel.

Of course, people do not become perfect overnight. With help from God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit He gives them, they grow in obedience. God's laws will gradually be written into their character. But eventually, as Scripture shows, these people will be transformed into perfect spirit beings who will never sin again.

This is how sin—and the suffering and death that result from sin—will ultimately one day be remembered no more (verse 34). It simply will no longer exist.

To learn more about this process of spiritual transformation and how you may enter into that relationship with Jesus Christ.