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Point 3: The Law—God's Word For His People In a Rebellious World

GOD MAKES A PEOPLE FOR HIMSELF

As we saw in the last chapter, after the Fall (Point 2) God immediately committed Himself to begin dealing with His rebellious creatures in a way that would bring about their rescue and restoration. God's covenant of grace with sinful Man was foreshadowed in the promises made to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15) and to Noah (Gen 8:10—9:7). The covenant took a more definite form with Abraham (Gen 12:1ff; 13:14—17; 15:4ff; 17:1—4; 22:15—19), and it was renewed with Abraham's son Isaac (Gen 26:23ff) and his son Jacob (Gen 35:9—15). This covenant was the basis for the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (Ex 6:2—8), as well as their entry into the Promised Land under Joshua (Josh 1).

God's stunning rescue of His people from Egypt is recorded in the early parts of the Book of Exodus. This rescue was accompanied by a declaration of His power over the heathen gods: each of the plagues was a victory over the idols of the Egyptians (Ex 12:12). God gathered His particular chosen people to Himself in the desert wilderness under the leadership of Moses.

Notice that this people of God, as a nation, was not among the original nations of the earth. God called them into being when He called Abram to leave his home city, Ur of the Chaldees, and to take his family and follow where God led him. So the Hebrew nation, descended from Abram, came about at God's call to trust Him.

ACTION

1 Because of this, do not be surprised that the life of God's people is characterized by trusting His Word. The whole history of God's dealing with His people is centred on their belief (or unbelief) in His promises.

2 Paul teaches that this principle is fundamental for understanding how to live with God. Carefully study Romans 4 and 1:16–17. The basic relation which governs all your dealings with God is this: to trust Him for what He says He has done and will do. Indeed, by the end of Romans 14, Paul's definition of sin becomes a failure to keep on trusting God, moment-by-moment ('for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin', 14:23, RSV).

GIFT ALWAYS COMES BEFORE TASK

In the wilderness God made a covenant with His people and unfolded before them a remarkable way of life. The Law is His revelation of how they were to live before Him.

Notice, however, that this Law was not the basis of their identity as God's people. God called them to be His own *before* He called them to obediently do as they were told. This prior calling was also the basis for having the power to do as they are told.

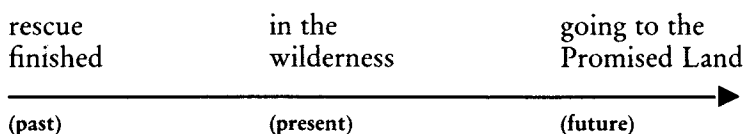
Here is the same principle we encountered in Chapter 2. There we saw that we are first given the gift of knowing 'who' we are, in relation to God, before we are either set in relation to our neighbour or instructed to 'do' anything. 'Who I am' comes before 'what I do'; the gift precedes the task; being

comes before doing. Indeed, if we are not first given to *be* the people of God, we cannot *do* it.

Much more will be said about this in later chapters. Suffice it to say here (for our consideration of the Law) that the people of God heard what He required of them only *after* they had been rescued from Egypt and were standing in a place of liberation from His wrath. Their freedom came first; and this accomplished rescue was the basis on which they were free to do what lay ahead of them. They stood under the grace of knowing they were a people rescued from slavery: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Ex 20:2).

In the covenant made at Mount Sinai, God was expressing promises to His people. He promised He would be their God (Ex 20:2); He promised they would be His people (Ex 19:5–6); and He promised He would drive the nations out of Canaan and give the land to the Israelites (Ex 34:10–16, 24). The last was a future promise—it was not yet seen by the people in the wilderness.

If we expressed these promises as a diagram, it would run like this:



Now, what does it mean for the people of God to deal faithfully with Him in the wilderness?

First, they must stand on what God has already accomplished. They are out of Egypt—that is finished business. It is what God has done.

Second, they must realize that where they currently stand (in the wilderness) is a place of God's call, and that the task of living with Him there can be faced only if they are certain about their finished rescue. Their life must be walked by faith,

trusting that God accepts them and stands beside them, leading them on.

Third, they must hope in God (in the sense of confidently relying on Him) to do what He has said He will. Their entry to the Promised Land is not yet accomplished; but they have been rescued from Egypt, they are on the way, and it is only a matter of time.

So the whole of 'wilderness living' is living *by faith*—whether it is faith about the past, the present or the future.

ACTION

We will develop this further in later chapters in the setting of the New Testament, so let's see how practical it is now.

1 Be quite clear that being freed from slavery to sin (what this means is that it no longer dominates your whole life), rescued from God's wrath and released from your guilt are all accomplished if you trust the work of Christ. Trusting Christ for the past things He has finished is the basis for strength now.

2 Remember, you cannot be God's child by what you do. You must *be* God's child before you can *live* as His child; in fact, you can only truly perform the task of living for God if you are sure you are *not* doing it to become a Christian. Becoming God's child is His gift to you—it is finished business. Living as God's child is the task you are given once you are in His family. You are born again—now live on that basis. Your birth has been performed—now believe it, assume it and get on with growing into maturity.

3 Be convinced that by yourself you really are lost. Only God can rescue you. Study the New Testament carefully to see what God has done alone and what He will do with your co-operation. These are two different matters. We will develop this later, but you could begin your search now.

4 Notice in passing that wilderness living involved hardship

and troubles, staying unified, willingly submitting to leadership, and not hankering for the old life of Egypt (slavery). It also meant being prepared for warfare; the Israelites had a battle to get into Canaan. The Promised Land was for those who would 'overcome'—yet the victory was in God's power.

THE FUNDAMENTAL REASON FOR DOING ANYTHING

We are now in a position to consider the Law as it was enacted for God's covenant people on Mount Sinai.

We have already noted this was not the establishment of the covenant for the first time. Nor were the requirements of the Law and the people's performance of it the grounds for the covenant. Rather, the Law came to people who were *already* chosen, rescued and known by God—that is, people who were already in a covenant relationship with Him—and instructed them how to live in a world which is in rebellion against God. Further, it instructed them how to maintain their covenant obligations as they entered the Promised Land to conquer it in the name of God (holy war), and how to then sustain their life in an alien and aggressive environment.

The nature of the Law has important implications for why the people of God do the things He commands. It is not because the commands have some sort of social usefulness or value (even though doing the truth is always socially the best thing to do). God's people do not look ahead to some social goal and say, 'That's worth doing, it's in accord with our aims, we'll do it.' In that case, they would be controlled by the goal, rather than by God's gift of who they are. No; the reason for obeying the commandments is simply that they are God's will for the people He has called to Himself. Because they are already God's people, they are to live this way.

Consequently, our ethics, our reasons for doing things, arise out of the status God has already conferred on us, and our behaviour is a matter of obedience to the One who has made His covenant with us. We do what we do as God's people because it is consistent with who we are, and who we

are is a gift of God's grace, granted to sinful rebels who are privileged to know Him.

ACTION

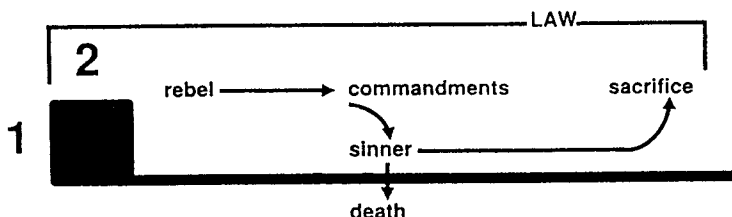
1 Whenever you come to do anything, do not first ask, 'Is the goal of this action worthwhile?', but rather, 'Is this action consistent with being God's child?'

2 If your life has been one of obedience to God, resist the temptation to believe He must accept you more because you have been obedient. This is a deception. His acceptance of you has never hung on your performance but on the finished work of Jesus.

3 This does not mean, of course, that an obedient life does not please Him. Your obedience brings God pleasure—so obey Him.

THE LAW: COMMANDS AND SACRIFICES

In the last chapter, we saw that the Law—like the school teacher's detention of her class—was addressed to a situation of rebellion. Just as the teacher had a new word for her students when they were disobedient, so the Law assumed 'changes of policy' arising out of the rebels' activity. God does not abandon His creatures to chaos; He speaks to them within it. He cares for the rebels and His Word chases them and finds them in their rebellion.



This Law provided by God had two aspects to it: we will call them the *commandments* and the *sacrificial system*. Together they made up the Law; both had to be done. However, we can consider them separately because they had different functions for God's people.

The commandments pointed specifically to concrete sins—that is, to actual deeds which transgress God's boundary. The sacrificial system addressed the relational problem which results from sin; it concerned the questions: Once I have sinned, how will I, as a covenant person, sustain my relation with a holy God who is justly offended by my rebellion? What can be done about my guilt, my defilement and my lack of peace with God, all of which result from the deeds I have done?

When a rebellious person looks at the commandments, he discovers they condemn him because they show—concretely, in terms of actual deeds done—exactly where his personal rebellion lies. The commandments do not make him a rebel; he already is one. Rather, they show him specifically where his rebellion is found. Just as litmus paper dipped into a chemical solution displays the acidity of the solution by a colour change, so the Law, gently presented after rescue and safety has been established by a loving God, displays the depth of the rebellion of the human heart.

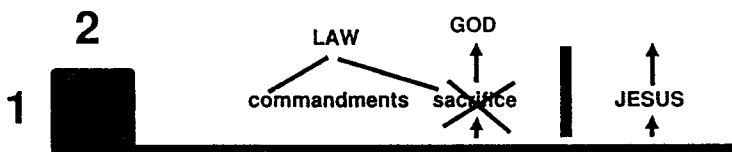
So through the Law, God reveals His holiness to the rescued Hebrew people. We, with them, learn that He is to be feared because His standards reveal He is awesome. And learning this about God, we discover just how far gone we are and what a desperate disease sin is within us. How can anyone have covenant with, and live in proximity to, this God who is a consuming fire? How will relationship be maintained between a sinning people and a holy God?

The Law's answer to these questions was that by God's gift it could be done—but not directly. It could be done only through God's provision of a mediating sacrifice. God could be approached through a series of sacrifices which were relational in that they dealt personally with Him concerning

particular areas of life. There were sacrifices for making atonement (burnt offering, Lev 1:1–17; 6:8–13); for dedicating and consecrating ordinary home food (cereal offering, Lev 2:1–16; 6:14–18); for expressing joyful worship before God (peace offering, Lev 3:1–17; 7:1–34); for repairing a breach in fellowship (sin offering, Lev 4:1–13; 6:24–30); and for restoring fellowship with God broken because of sin (guilt offering, Lev 5:14–6:7). The whole sacrificial system revealed in the Mosaic Law was to be meticulously adhered to—the Israelites were not to be sloppy in dealing with a holy God, ever!

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR BIBLE READING NOW

When we get to Point 4 in our diagram, it will become clear that, because Jesus Christ is the one true sacrifice for sin, all the sacrificial rites we find in the Old Testament will come to their natural and intended fruition in His Person and work.



This immediately makes a difference to the way we read the Old Testament. Now that Christ has come and fulfilled it all, we look back after Point 4 and see the sacrificial system in a new light. We read it now recognizing it was setting up patterns for understanding Jesus. The sacrificial system was a way of dealing with personal sin in the light of God's Law; it now serves to instruct us about what Christ has done in His sacrifice of Himself for transgressors of that Law. So we do not now read the Old Testament ceremonial law to perform

it, but to count it, by faith, as done—fulfilled in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

This is the reason it is customary, in discussions of the place of the Old Testament Law after the coming of Jesus, to divide the Law into ceremonial (cultic) law and moral law.

Moral law is that instruction in the Old Testament which speaks of the sorts of things God requires because of who He is. These things must still be done after the coming of Jesus Christ because God is still the same God. On these matters, the commands have not changed. The way they are expressed in the Old Testament may be bound to a particular culture and style, so they may need to be interpreted and understood for our century. But they still have to be obeyed, for they reflect God's Person and character.

The ceremonial law, on the other hand, gives instruction about the cultic worship of Israel. The sacrificial system was God's method enabling His people *then* to maintain their relationship with Him. We would never follow it today because it has now been performed in a final way by Jesus. We may read the ceremonial law to help us understand Christ, but we would never actually carry it out because that would be acting as if He had never come. It would be placing our trust in bulls and goats rather than Jesus. God required animal sacrifices at that time, but these have now been brought to their perfect conclusion in Jesus. It was, of course, right for those who lived in ancient Israel to use the sacrifices—not because, of themselves, they took away sins, but because they anticipated the great and final sacrifice, Christ, who did. The sacrifices were a 'type', or pattern, of Jesus.

ACTION

1 Study Deuteronomy 10:12–13 and 4:10. Do you notice that the first thing on God's list is to 'fear' Him? This means to have an awesome reverence for who He is. He is overwhelmingly holy, 'other', and there is no one like Him. He is jealous of His glory precisely because no one else is worthy of

it. Study Proverbs 1:7; 8:13, Psalm 130:3–4 and pray them into your life.

2 Study the offerings listed in Leviticus and meditate on them as being fulfilled in Jesus. Give thanks for His finished work.

THE FAILURE OF THE 'MARTIAL LAW' TO GIVE ULTIMATE MEANING

To the analogy of the teacher with the rebellious class we must add another which gives a different perspective—the analogy of 'martial law'.

Point 1 taught us that God is King over the whole of creation—and being King, He is ruler over His creatures. These creatures depend on His Word for their creation and preservation. At Point 2, we saw the creatures turning into rebels by adopting a position in which they attempted to be 'like God'. Rebellion is the creature trying to cease being a creature in action. Now, at Point 3, we see the King, in response to this rebellion, issuing an 'emergency proclamation'. He sets up 'martial law' for the period of the Rebellion.

This martial law begins immediately after the Rebellion, with God's continuing care for His creatures and His provision for their welfare. It is seen clearly in His acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and rejection of Cain's and in His prohibitions against homicide and sanctions imposed on those who kill another (Gen 4:1–12; 9:5–6). God makes it clear He has a definite mind about how His world is to be ordered in the face of the emergency created by Man's rebellion. The Law given through Moses at Mount Sinai is the specific, detailed expression for His chosen people of God's character, seen in what He approves and disapproves, as well as being a general martial proclamation of how to live with Him if you had done wrong.

Like all martial law, it has certain characteristics. One of its aims is to *protect* the citizens of the kingdom during the

uprising. It is therefore often expressed in negative terms and has the function of imposing limits. It holds back the natural chaos which follows in the rebels' path.

It also expresses the way to relate to the King in a world where natural lawlessness must now be presumed. Being tailored to fit this prevailing situation, it will primarily interpret the state of rebellion for you. The law does not apply to any situation other than the emergency. Consequently, it will not tell you clearly how things might have been if Man had not rebelled.

This is important. A common problem in emergencies—particularly those which have gone on for as long as anyone can remember—is that people begin to live as if life had never been any different. They adapt to martial law and to the state of presumed lawlessness as the norm, forgetting it has not always been that way. This adaption comes from accepting the situation as unchangeable; therefore we must 'come to terms with it'. Christians can never adopt such a policy. We do not come to terms with the Rebellion by bending with it but by sustaining a resolute warfare against it, both in ourselves and in the world around us. At the same time, we seek to live within the order the King has established for the emergency.

This adaption to martial law was one of the mistakes of the Pharisees. As people who took God seriously and treated the Law as something of great concern, they were right. What they failed to remember was that once it was not so (Mt 19:8). They began to adapt to the Rebellion, and so took the Law as being the way of life God wanted from the start. They were right that the Law was the 'Word of God' by which Man would live; what they forgot, to use another Pharisee's term, was 'the weakness of the flesh' (Rom 8:3, RSV). They forgot they were fallen, weak and sin-diseased rebels.

Their failure to relate Point 3 (the Law) to Point 1 (before the Fall) was mirrored in their inability to recognize Jesus at Point 4 as the bringer of the new rule of peace with the King.

The martial law was 'fulfilled' by Him; it was brought to its intended meaning and its goal. Its intended meaning was to point to the King as a rightful Governor addressing His rebellious populace. Its goal was to point to the King's desire for peace and restoration between Himself and the rebels. Jesus showed that the Law was important but not absolute. No wonder the Pharisees felt Him to be a threat!

THE MARTIAL LAW POINTS FORWARD TO A COMING KING

Because the martial law is something imposed on rebels for the 'emergency period', this implies it is temporary. It looks forward to the time when the King will come and by His personal presence establish the kingdom of God on earth. So while the Law states how God deals with the emergency, the Hebrew prophets also speak of a future Messiah who will bring the rule of God by coming among His people.

The presence of this King will also 'fulfil' the Law, because the purpose of the Law is to tide us over until peace is established and rebels cease to be rebels. In this way, the stringency of the Law leads us to Christ, because we cannot perform it—and in despair we are drawn to God's solution in Jesus for the way to be justified.

The Law exposes our deep inability to satisfy God or even obey Him. It makes us desperate for reconciliation with Him, and desirous of a change in ourselves so that we voluntarily want to please Him. It makes us long for the regeneration of our spirit which He has promised (Ezek 36:26), along with the presence of His Spirit within us (Ezek 36:27), so that by nature we can follow His laws with power to do them. This is to serve God now 'in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code' (Rom 7:6).

ACTION

We will say more about all this in future chapters, but it is important to begin thinking about it now. Ponder the two

analogies we have used: the teacher in the classroom and the King who has proclaimed a martial law for the Rebellion. Understanding these perspectives will save you from repeating the mistake of living by law when God has now called you to live by grace, even though His Law still applies to the external world.

Before the next chapter: Read Mark 1:15 and 7:1–23; also Matthew 19:1–10.