Articles by J. M. Davies

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Law and Grace (Apr 1958)

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

The giving of the law was a major event in the history of Israel, and in God’s dealings with mankind. It was accompanied by an unparalleled revelation of glory, “The Lord descended upon the mount in fire,” and “The whole mount quaked greatly.” Darkness was God’s pavilion. There was the voice of the trumpet and the voice of words; furthermore, so awesome was the sight that Moses said, “I exceedingly fear and quake.” The people, similarly, removed and stood afar off as they witnessed the thunderings, lightnings, and the voice of the trumpet. They besought Moses to be their mediator lest they should die, so great was their fear. Consequently, it was ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator, and it is spoken of as the “law of the Lord” and the “law of Moses” (Luke 2:22-23).

The term “the law” is used in a variety of ways in the Scriptures. In Luke 24:44, it is associated with the Psalms and the Prophets, and would include all the five books of Moses. This is also seen in Rom. 3:21. In Deut. 31:26 and in Joshua 1:7, it refers rather to the statutes and judgments recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, which book is a rehearsal or a second giving of the law. The majority of the references to the law in Hebrews are to those parts of the law concerning the priesthood and sacrifices, whereas the nearly 100 references to it in the Epistle to the Romans and to the Galatians emphasis is focussed on the law which was engraven in stone, the

ten commandments. Nowhere, however, do the Scriptures draw a distinction between the moral law and the ceremonial law. All the laws, whether moral or ceremonial, form part of THE LAW. The words, “The law having a shadow of good things to come …” (Heb. 10:1) must not be limited in its interpretation to the superceding of the sacrifices by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The engraving in stone also has been superceded and substituted by the inward work wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart (Heb. 10:16).

A study of the relevant passages in the New Testament, and also in the Old, reveal at least a threefold limitation imposed on the ministry of the law.

Limited as to the people: The law was the covenant established between God and the nation of Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:5; 24:1-8, Rom. 2:17-20); the Gentile nations were not included in it. Its privileges and promises were exclusively for Israel. The Gentiles, says the Apostle, have not the law (Rom. 2-14). Parabolically, Isaiah speaks of Israel as a vineyard which had been fenced about. The statutes and commandments constitute the fence which marked them out and separated them from all the nations. The Apostle Peter stigmatized it as a “yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Provision was made whereby Gentiles could be taken in and reckoned among them, but this privilege was not extended to any nation as such. Paul definitely says that “whatsoever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law” (Rom. 3:19); The law then was limited in its scope and association to the nation of Israel.

Limited as to its purpose: In the Epistle to the Romans and the Galatians, the Apostle enters into a detailed argument regarding the relationship between the promise made to Abraham and the law given by Moses. The promise of blessing upon Abraham and his seed was unconditional, and was confirmed by an oath. It anteceded the giving of the law by 450 years. Therefore the law cannot disannul it or make it void. Why then was the law given? It was “added because of transgression” (Gal. 5:19). Israel was, as it were, put under the custody of a guardian (Gal. 3:25). The law was not a schoolmaster to lead them to Christ as their Saviour, but it was the appointed tutor until Christ came. The law “entered that sin might abound” (Rom. 5:20). By it sin was to be imputed as transgression (Rom. 4:15, 5:13). By the commandment “sin was to become exceeding sinful” (Rom. 7:13). “By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). Its ministry in this respect may be illustrated by a mirror revealing outward defilement; or a microscope discovering sin which is undetectable by the naked eye. The keenest razor edge when viewed under a microscope is seen to be uneven as a saw. This is in contrast to the handiwork of God. The magnifying glass reveals its perfection, whether it be a flower or a fly. Moreover, the law may be compared to the X-ray, for the Apostle said, “I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7). Hence we are told that the law worketh wrath (Rom. 4:15). Sin like a lurking beast of prey, or a poisonous cobra, takes the commandment as an ambush with a view to doing its deadly work (Rom. 7:11).

In 2 Cor. 3, the Apostle speaks of the ministry of that which was engraven in stones, the ministry of Moses, as

a ministry of death. This is aptly illustrated in the sign he performed in Egypt, the turning of the water into blood, in contrast to the act of the Lord Who turned it into wine; and also in the death of the 3000 at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was a ministry of condemnation, and withal a ministry of that which is done away, disannulled. While the Mosaic economy was ushered in with a blaze of glory on the mount, and with the tranfigured face of Moses, yet that glory was only a temporary one. It was a fading glory. Hence Moses covered his face with a veil lest the children of Israel should apprehend its transient character. The veil hid both the glory and its evanescence.

Limited as to its power: “The law is holy, and just, and good.” Absolute holiness, righteousness, and goodness are its requirements. God is holy, God is just, and there is none good but God. Hence the law mirrors the character of Him Who gave it. It has power; it has authority to expose the guilt, to accuse, to condemn, to curse, and to execute the guilty; but it cannot give life (Gal. 3:21); it cannot show mercy. It is “weak on account of the flesh” (Rom. 8:2). Therefore, by its work no sinner can be justified, nor can the fruit of sanctification be produced by submission to its yoke.

Some years ago I heard a speaker relate the story of an attempt to salvage a ship which had sunk in the English Channel. It was undergirded by strong steel cables, and then the necessary power was provided, but to the dismay of the engineers, only the cables came up. The ship had broken in the process of being lifted. The operation only served to discover the weakness of that vessel. How like the law! That on which it operates, the

flesh, is “not subject to the law of God neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

The Grace Of God

Over against such a dark background, the grace of God is most attractive.

It is universal: Grace recognizes no national or historical privileges, nor any racial or geographical boundaries. By the cross, the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile was broken down. At Pentecost, the grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men had its epiphany (Titus 2:11). Its glory far excelled that of the Mosaic economy. “Whosoever toucheth the mount shall be put to death” was the solemn warning of Sinai, but “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” was the confident proclamation of Pentecost. It was in keeping with the commission of the Lord that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

It is comprehensive: In contrast to the law which was “added until the seed should come” grace is supra-dispensational. No sooner had sin entered than the prophecy regarding the seed of the woman, and the final bruising of the serpent’s head, was uttered. This was entirely of grace. It was unmerited and unsought, and withal absolutely unconditional.

The triplets: promises, faith, and grace referred to in Rom. 4:15 have been operative since the dawn of human history. Even during the Mosaic economy, during Israel’s chequered career, they formed the anchor, the rock and the refuge of the spiritual. Like a bright constellation they shine clearly and constantly, as illustrated in the

lives of men such as David and others. When sin abounded, or reached its high-water level in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, grace overflowed, it super-abounded. In the very place where Christ was killed, an amnesty was proclaimed and salvation offered. Now "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth." In Him its precepts were exemplified, its purposes fulfilled, its penalty exacted, and its power terminated. Christ removed the handwriting that was against us taking it out of the way, nailing it to His cross (Col. 2:14). Hence, grace reigns unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is powerful: What may we say of the power of grace? What wonders there are to its credit! Paul, its greatest trophy, says the grace of God was exceeding and abundant toward him, and he delighted to speak of the message he proclaimed as the "gospel of the grace of God," for it is "by grace we are saved" (Eph. 2:8); and by grace that we are justified (Rom. 3:24). Moreover, we wait for the grace that is being brought to us at the appearing of our Lord (1 Peter 1:13).

Human merit is completely ruled out. It has no place in our salvation, whether past present or future. Along with the triplets: promise, faith, and grace the Apostle speaks of the law of works and of debt. These two sets of words represent two diametrically opposed principles. They must not be confused. To return to the law now is to return to that which is spoken of as "weak and beggarly elements," a retrogression from sonship and maturity to childhood, it is senility (Gal. 4:1-6).

To be made an overseer by men is to be made a master, but to be created an overseer by the Spirit is to be made a servant.

Speaking in Tongues (Aug-Sept 1964)

From Food for the Flock, Aug-Sept 1964.

Paul's Attitude to it—1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Twice in the Epistle to the Corinthians the Apostle says, "Be ye followers of me." The first applies to the example set by him in his service while at Corinth and in his attitude to division and sectarian strife (4:15). He was not the head of a party, or the leader of a faction. The second relates to the way he had exercised his liberty as detailed in chapter 9 in contrast to the way in which the Israelites had behaved in the wilderness, and as some were evidently doing at Corinth (11:1). Although he does not specifically appeal to them to follow his example in the way he viewed the gift of tongues and its exercise, it is quite evident that the personal references in the chapter are introduced for that purpose. The attitude of the Apostle and that of the Corinthians to the exercise of the gift was very different. They were poles apart. The contrast is very marked. Had they considered the gift in the same light as the Apostle did there would not have been the need for the exhortations in the chapter. Their failure called for the correction.

They were urged to covet earnestly the better gifts (12:31); to desire spiritual gifts, but rather that of prophesying (14:1). He exhorts them to seek to excel to the edifying of the Church (14:12). And while speaking in tongues was not to be prohibited, they were to covet to prophesy (14:39). The words of verse 23 and verses 33-34 indicate that there was much confusion in their gatherings, with many speaking at the same time and women taking part also. They were severely

reprimanded and plainly told that God is not the author of such confusion, and that “as in all the assemblies of the saints women were to keep silence.”

The Corinthians were over-estimating the importance and value of the gift, and failed to honour the Lord in the exercise of it. The Apostle sets a three-fold limitation upon it. He shows that its value was limited in contrast to that of prophesying; that as a sign gift its purpose was limited to them that believe not; and that its exercise was to be within well defined limitations in the assembly.

The word “tongue” is used in a two fold way in the chapter. In verse 9 it refers to the physical member, as elsewhere in the New Testament, such as James 3:5. But the other references are concerned with the exercise of the gift, that is, speaking with a tongue or in tongues, therefore in a language. In the King James version the word “unknown” is introduced, but the fact that it is printed in italics shows that it is not in the text. However, even though the word “unknown” is not in the text it serves a definite purpose. The tongues spoken were unknown to those assembled, hence the need for an interpreter, that is, one who possessed the gift of interpretation. The word “unknown” must not be understood as referring to some unspoken language. This is clear from verse 10 where the Apostle says that no voice is without signification, or meaning, or is unintelligible, a mere gibberish.

Paul’s attitude to the gift and its exercise is crystallized in the verses where he uses the personal pronoun:

1. “I thank God that I speak with tongues more than ye all” (v. 18). Paul therefore possessed the gift and

exercised it. He could not be charged with being envious of them. The Apostle's words do not mean that he could speak in more languages than they all, or that he was more multilingual than they. He is referring to tongues in the charismatic use of the word.

2. "I would that ye all spoke with tongues" (v. 5). The words are almost an echo of those of Moses in the wilderness. "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets" (Num. 11:29). Paul had no objection to them speaking in tongues, but he would rather that they prophesied.

3. "If I know not the meaning of the voice I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me" (v. 11). The three-fold purpose of ministry mentioned in verse 3: edification, exhortation and comfort, would seem to be suggested in the illustrations used in verses 7-9. A harmonious distinction of sounds is essential if the musical accompaniment is to be to comfort. The trumpet will fail to awaken or stir the heart to action if it fails to sound the alarm. And intelligible speech is an absolute necessity if the message is to be understood and to minister edification. If the language used is not known then the speaker and the hearers will be barbarians to each other.

4. "Wherefore let him that prayeth in a tongue pray that he may interpret. FOR if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful." There could be no abiding fruit or blessing from that exercise. It would be a waste of time and energy (vs. 13-14), as without understanding there can be no edification, either to the one praying or to those who hear. "The

other is not edified" (v. 17). In the light of this the words of verse 4. "He edifieth himself," are only true if the one praying in a tongue understood what he was saying.

5. "I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also" (v. 15). Paul states emphatically that he would not pray, praise or give thanks in a tongue unless he understood what he said. This is the very evident meaning of verses 1415. "What is it then?" or what am I to conclude? or what course am I to follow? "I will pray…with the understanding also." The word "spirit" in each case refers to his own spirit, and not to the Holy Spirit. The Apostle is not suggesting as some think that he prayed in spirit, that is in a tongue at times, and with the understanding or in a language he was familiar with at other times. On the contrary the words establish that he would not pray in a tongue unless he understood and could interpret what he said. In this way he enforces by his own example the exhortation of verse 13, "Let him pray that he may interpret."

6. "Yet in the assembly I would rather speak five words with the understanding that I might teach others also, than ten thousand in a tongue" (v. 19). The relative value of tongues could hardly be more pointedly stated. He would prefer to speak five words such as, "Christ died for the ungodly," or "By grace are ye saved," than 10,000 in a tongue. To occupy time to speak so many words in a tongue which was not understood would be worse than futile. It would be an insult and an affront to the assembled company.

7. "If I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by

revelation or by knowledge, or by prophesying or by doctrine?" (v. 6). Revelation was essential to prophesying and knowledge to teaching. Thus speaking in a tongue would only be to profit if thereby he brought a revelation or knowledge referred to as mysteries in verse 2.

Let the advocates of the present Glossolalia movement and all those who profess to speak in tongues test their attitude to the exercise of the gift by comparing it with that of the Apostle. Their behaviour is more Corinthian than apostolic.

"Covet earnestly the better gifts." "Seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the Church." And, "Be not children in understanding." In understanding be men, be mature, be fully grown. Cease to be children in your thinking and behaviour in all things except malice. In malice be infants, be babes (v. 20).

The Christian and the Mosaic Law (Part 1) (Nov 1965)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 11 No. 9, Nov 1965.

In the earlier chapters of the Epistle to the Romans the apostle establishes very clearly the doctrine of justification by grace independent of all merit on the part of the individual, and totally independent of any rite or ceremony or any deeds of the law. Then he proceeds to show that the believer is sanctified independent of the law or of any legal self-effort.

The categorical statement of chapter 6:15, that we are not under the law but under grace immediately poses a problem giving rise to the question: “What then? shall we sin because we are not under the law, but under grace?” The answer to this question is in two parts. In chapter 6.15-23, its fallacy is exposed, and in chapter 7 the futility of putting a man under the law is expounded.

Answer A. The fallacy exposed (6.15-23): This may be just very briefly summarized. In the answer emphasis is laid upon four matters of cardinal importance which the objector had either ignored or was ignorant of.

a. The message of the gospel insists that compromise is a spiritual impossibility (v. 16). No man can serve two masters. Just as the word “death” is the key word in the first half of the chapter, so “servants” is the key word in the second half. The word thus translated is the word for “bondslaves.” A person is either theslave of of sin or of obedience (v. 16), of righteousness (v. 18), and of God (v. 22). The Christian is one who, constrained by the love of Christ, is prepared to receive the marks, or the

brands of a slave (Ex. 21:1-6). There can be no duplicity. There must be integrity and absolute sincerity.

b. The message of the gospel is a dynamic. Hence, conversion is a spiritual reality. The experience of the Apostle himself is one of the greatest illustrations of this. Grace accomplishes what the law cannot. It leads to true liberty.

c. Implicit in the gospel message also is the fact, consecration is a spiritual necessity. It is by dedication and devotion to the Lord and not by the restraints of the law that the believer is to be preserved from a lapse through the infirmity of the flesh. It produces sanctity — fruit unto holiness.

D. The gospel produces a shame, true repentance in the life of the believer as he thinks of his past life in view of what the end of such a life is. With the believer the consummation is to have a priority. He is to live in the light of Eternity. He is to be more concerned with eternal things than with the temporal. There was a time when certain preachers were known as Eternity men. The contemplation of the goal, the glory ahead buoyed the Apostle when he was in the dungeon, and it made a Psalmist out of Samuel Rutherford when he was incarcerated. Time, how fast its fleeting! Eternity, how sure its dawning!

Answer B. The futility of putting a Christian under the law (ch. 7). As the former husband it produces fruit unto death (vv. 1-6). As the ministry of the letter it pronounces the death penalty for the sin of covetuousness (vv7-13), and provides no help to counteract the power of indwelling sin, or of the law of sin in the members (vv. 14-25).

“As we approach the contents of this chapter, Denney’s comment is helpful. The subject of chapter 6 is continued. The Apostle shows how, by death, the Christian is freed from the law, which good as it is in itself and in the divine intention; nevertheless, owing to the corruption of man’s nature, instead of making him good, it perpetually stimulates sin. Verses 1-6 describe the liberation from the law; verses 7-13, the actual working of the law; and in verses 14-25. we are shown that the working of the law is not due to anything in itself, but to the power of sin in the flesh” (Wuest).

The argument of chapter 7 does not deal with the matter of peace with God or of acceptance with God, but of fruit for God in the life, and how to produce it. It is not the problem of justification but the pursuit of holiness, as shown by F. W. Grant in the Numerical Bible.

In chapter six we read of “law” without the article; “the law,” with the article (v 7,12,14), and of “the law of God” (vs. 22-25). In some instances the word is used as denoting a certain principle in the same way as we speak of the laws of gravity. The words of verse 21: “I find then a law that when I would do good, evil is present with me,” illustrate this usage. We also read of “the commandment” as referring to the whole law, which was ordained to life (v. 20). and as referring to a specific commandment, “Thou shalt not covet” (v. 7). These references indicate that the law, embodying the ten commandments, which was given to Israel at Sinai, and its authority and ministry is what is discussed by the Apostle in the chapter.

Viewed in this light the law is synonymous with the first covenant or the old covenant which was inaugurated at

Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24). Much if not most of what is sometimes called the ceremonial law was added later, after the Tabernacle had been erected: “And the Lord called unto Moses and spake unto him out of the Tabernacle of the congregation saying …” (Lev.1.1). The sacrifices that were then ordained were a provision of grace in view of Israel’s failure. Because of the one sacrifice for sin offered at Calvary they are now obsolete. They are no longer valid. There remains no more sacrifice for sin in that elaborate system. It has all been superceded and set aside. And the law, the first covenant, has been done away, it has been annulled. The Scriptures do not draw a line of demarcation between the moral and the ceremonial law. Each is an integral part of the covenant, often referred to as the law which was given by Moses. It was a ministry of “the letter” and has been superceded by the ministry of “the Spirit.” The ethical or moral principles contained in it, or what is termed its “righteous requirements,” abide. But, as a covenant, the law has been abrogated.

This is established beyond any doubt by a consideration of the metaphorical expressions used in the epistles. Figuratively the law is spoken of in many ways.

1. “The husband” (Rom. 7.1-6). The believer is dead to it and has been brought into living union with Christ in resurrection.

2. The “Yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5.1. Acts. 15.10). Peter refers to it as a “yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.” It is an unbelievable yoke.

3. “Our schoolmaster” (Gal. 3.24). The word is not to be understood as implying that the law is an instructor leading souls to Christ. It was a guardian, a tutor or

governor introduced as an interim arrangement until the time appointed of the Father. It kept those under its custody as in yard, in a fold, or in a prison (Gal. 3.23-4.7).

4. “The middle wall of partition.” It separated the Jews from the Gentiles. While this expression includes the whole of the Jewish economy, it more specifically refers to the “law of commandments,” that which God had ordained. The word “ordinances” does not refer to the ceremonial sacrifices. “The middle wall of partition,” the enmity, was dissolved by the abolition of the law of commandments” (Vincert).

5. “The handwriting of ordinances which was contrary to us….” (Col. 2:14). The handwriting does not refer to the fact that the tables were written with the finger of God, but rather to the signature, the autograph: Israel signed as it were at the foot of Mt. Sinai when on three separate occasions they accepted the terms of the covenant, saying, “All that the Lord hath said will we do and be obedient” (Ex. 19:8 24:3, 7). The law is referred to in this portion as a bill of debt, a bond which Israel executed at Sinai. For the believer the word “cancelled” has been written over that document, that promissory note. Then Christ took it out of the way or tore it up, and nailed to His cross.

6. “Cast out the bondwoman and her son” (Gal. 4:21-31). In his allegorical treatment of this event the Sinaitic Covenant is represented by Hagar. As she was a bondwoman, so Mt. Sinai gendereth to bondage. Ishmael could not be heir along with Isaac, and the “law and the gospel cannot co-exist” (Lightfoot).

7. It is also referred to as “The letter” (2 Cor. 3:6. Rom. 7:6). It was the letter engraver on stones, which specifically refers to the decalogue. It is “a ministration of death” and of “condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:7-9). The inauguration of that covenant was glorious. It was ushered in with a blaze of glory. The face of Moses shone, but it was a fading glory, a glory which was to pass away. It was temporary, in contrast to “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4-6). That glory is an abiding glory. Hence the gospel is the gospel of the glory of Christ. Just as the glory in the face of Moses was to be done away, so was the ministry of the letter to be done away (v. II). The ministry of the letter killeth, but that of the Spirit giveth life, as illustrated in the fact that 3000 died at the foot of Sinai whereas 3000 were saved at Pentecost.

The objection to the assertion that “sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under law but under grace,” was doubtless genuine. It was born out of the fact that the law had been given to Israel soon after their emergence from Egyptian bondage. Had it not been intended to inculcate a high standard of morality and righteousness in His redeemed people? Were these standards now obsolete? Was there no need and no value in putting the Gentile convert under the law? Was not this the procedure that was followed in pre-Christian days? And did not the Old Testament give such instructions? These questions and objections had to be satisfactorily answered. Furthermore, if the restraints of the law were removed, would it not open the door to license?

The Christian and the Moral Law (Dec 1965)

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The seventh chapter of Romans, as suggested in the quotation from Denney, divides naturally into three sections.

1. The law and its authority: its dominion and fruit: its relations to the sinner (1-6).

2. The law and its ministry: its relation to sin (7-13).

3. The law and its inability: the law and the saints (14-25).

1. The Law and its Authority (1-6).

Following the same method as in 6:2 and 6:15, the Apostle first gives a direct and definite answer (v. 1), and then proceeds to illustrate it and explain it. The illustration is given in verses 2-3 and the explanation in verses 4-6.

“The law has dominion over a man as long as he liveth.” The explanation in verses 4-6 makes it evident that these words are not to be interpreted as referring to a person’s physical death, but as long as he is unregenerate, or “in the flesh” (V.5). During that time he stands before God on the ground of his association with the first man Adam, on the ground of creature merit, or the ground of responsibility. While a person is in that state the law has power over him. It has power to accuse, to condemn, to curse, and to execute him. The law knows no mercy (cf. vv 9, 11, I died; it slew me). It

cannot be law and show grace; it must insist on its demands being met fully and perfectly. The union of the law and the sinner, under the simile of marriage, produced fruit, for the desires of sin, the affections of sin were called into activity by the law. They became operative and malignant. The fruit was death. But the believer is dead to the law by the Body of Christ. He is said to have died to that whereby he was held in bondage and under condemnation. He is viewed as having died to the law in the death of Christ, and thereby as having been delivered or loosed from its authority. The consequence is two-fold. He is thereby free to be joined to Christ in resurrection.

This union is to produce fruit unto God, just as the branch in the vine is to produce grapes (John 15). And his service will be in the energy of the Spirit, a new kind of power, rather than in accordance with the letter of the law. The words “Spirit” and “leter” being set over against each other antithetically indicate that the word “Spirit” is to be understood as referring to the Holy Spirit, just as the word “letter” refers to the law. It is the fact that the believer is delivered from the law by virtue of death that is the point of the illustration in verses 2-3. The woman is free to marry another when death has dissolved the first union. Apart from the dissolution of the first marriage by death there can be no union with Christ, and it is only with the risen Christ that we can be thus joined. Whereas it cannot be said that the law, the first husband according to the illustration, has died, yet it is true that in the death of Christ its authority to condemn has ceased, for in that death its penalty and its curse were fully borne and removed. That the first husband is to be understood as the law is evident from

the language of verse 5 as also from the point under discussion, that the believer is not under the law but under grace. The service of the believer as one who is thus “joined” to the Lord” is illustrated in that of the tribe of Levi. The name given him at his birth proved to be prophetic, for the tribe was later joined to Aaron to minister unto him and to keep the charge of all the Tabernacle (Gen. 29. 40. Num. 18. 2-4).

2. The Law and its Ministry (7-13).

These verses give a vivid picture of the Apostle when he was unregenerate, when he was still the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. They show how the Lord had been working effectually in him, preparing him for the revolutionary change he was to experience on the Damascus road, which was to completely re-orientate his life. In the language of the Lord he had found it hard to kick against the pricks. Some members of his family, he says, were in Christ before him (Rom. 16. 7). Their witness and that of the martyr Stephen, as well as that of those whom he had so bitterly persecuted, had doubtless pricked his conscience at times. Along with them was the ever present voice of the law, loud as thunder, accusing him. The words, “Thou shalt not covet.” revealed to him his sinful nature, even though he could claim that outwardly he was blamelss (Phil. 13:3-6).

Implicit in the words, “Is the law sin?” is the insinuating charge that he considered the law to be bad or evil, because he had said that by it the sinful passions had borne deadly fruit (v. 5). This the Apostle strongly denies. In his brief rebuttal he submits four strong arguments which prove the contrary.

a) By or through the law his sin of covetousness had been detected (v. 7). The commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” was what had made him conscious of sin, and had convicted him of the fact that his nature was sinful. Just as the X-ray film reveals the hidden and deadly internal cancer, or as the surgeon’s knife lays it bare, so the law had uncovered to him this unoperable condition. It had penetrated every organ of his being. The surgeon’s knife had, as it were, activitated it, had angered it and brought on immediate death.

b). Until the law sin was dead or inactive, but when the law came it became very active. It used the law as a fulcrum or leverage to activate and multiply sinful desires (vv. 8-9). Up until the law had come he had lived in a false Utopia, in a fool’s paradise. He was like the rich young ruler of whom we read in Matthew 19:16. He thought he had kept the commandments from his youth up, but the words of the Lord revealed his covetous nature. He went away sorrowful.

c). By the commandment sin had deceived him (v. 11). As a beast of prey hides behind an ambush ready to pounce upon its victim, so sin had taken the commandment as a base of operations from which to attack him, and to deceive him as a traitor. The marginal reference to the temptation and beguiling of Eve is suggestive of a similarity between the two. As a traitor sin had handed him over to the officers of the law. Once in their hands escape was impossible. No reprieve could be allowed. The law demanded the extreme penalty. He says: “I died”; “I found it to be unto death”; “It slew me.”

d). By or through the commandment sin was manifested in its true character (v. 13). The law was as a magnifying

glass. By it sin's exceeding sinfulness was made manifest. A study of the law and the offerings reveals the holiness of God and the leprotic condition of the human heart. It brings to light and condemns, not only the overt act, but the hidden spring, the source of all the defilement, as emphasized by the Lord in the words: "From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries… covetousness…pride …" Thirteen things are tabulated in this incriminating list, and they all come from within.

Wherefore the law is holy as to its character, perfectly just in its demands, and good as to its purpose. It was ordained to life. It promised life to the obedient. It said: "This do and thou shalt live." But because of man's inherent sinfulness, his incorrigible covetousness nature, the Apostle found it to be a "ministration of condemnation." "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law." In Romans the Apostle meets the objections or problems of an honest enquirer regarding the gospel of the grace of God, whereas in Galatians he anathematizes the exponents of systematized error, the teachings of Judaizing teachers mentioned in Acts 15:1. Nevertheless, he shows clearly in this chapter that the law is not a means of salvation, either of justification or of sanctification. Four times over in the compass of a very few verses he emphasizes that it is a "ministration of death." "I died"; "I found it to be unto death"; "by it slew me"; "working death in me by that which is good" (vv. 9, 10, 11, 13).

In the preceding paragraph he shows that the believer has died to the law, and is thereby delivered from it. In this paragraph he teaches that the believer has been

executed by the law because of the sin it revealed, and convicted him of, charged him with, and condemned him for. The same truth is stated in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ” (RV). The extreme penalty of the law, its curse had been meted out to him.

The Christian and the Moral Law (Part 3) (Jan 1966)

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3. The law and its inability. The law and the saint (vv 14-25).

This is a portion concerning which there has been much controversy. It has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Some would even question if it is to be understood as the actual experience of the Apostle. They would consider it a hypothetical case! Some consider it to be Paul's experience in his unregenerate days. This view has been expressed in the following words: "Paul is laying bare in Romans 7, his inward exercises. They are the experiences of a morally good man judged according to the standards of men, who has the desire to behave well, but something within him hinders him from doing what he mentally approves, and he does what he disapproves and hates. The man of Romans 7 is obviously not a profligate sinner nor is he a regenerate man, but a pious God-fearing man who is endeavouring to gain divine favour, and life everlasting by the deeds of the law." If this view is adopted then the agonizing cry, "O wretched man that I am," must have been uttered by Paul when he was still the kicking beast, breathing out murder and slaughter. This seems utterly inconceivable. Moreover, if it was uttered by him in his unconverted days then we should have it stated in the past tense as in verses 7-13. It should have been, "O wretched man that I WAS."

Others think that it is the portrayal of the experience of a carnally minded Christian, one who is constantly living a defeated life. But it may well be questioned if carnally minded Christians ever have such deep soul exercises.

W. Kelly in his notes on Romans writes as follows on this portion: “It is the case of one quickened, but not yet submitting to the righteousness of God. Hence being jealous for God, but ignorant of the full place in which redemption sets the believer, such a soul puts itself under law. There is an awakened conscience but no power. The state described, however, is in no case, I believe, final, but transitional, though bad and legal teaching may keep a soul in it till grace acts fully, it may be on a death-bed or what is equivalent.”

Then there are those who think that it is an accurate description of the spiritual exercises, failures and aspirations of a spiritually-minded believer who is keenly conscious of the fact of indwelling sin and is longing for the final deliverance. From his inward depths he yearns for deliverance from “this body of death.”

Horatius Bonar in his notes on the chapter says: “It furnishes a key to an experience which would otherwise have seemed inexplicable. It is God’s recognition of the saint’s inner conflict, and an indispensable process of discipline.”

And Bishop Ryle in his book on “Holiness” says: “In this chapter Paul says nothing which does not practically tally with the recorded experiences of the most eminent saints in every age, and he does say several things which no unregenerate man or weak believer would ever think of saying or cannot say. What I do lay stress upon is the broad fact that the best commentators in every

era have almost invariably applied the 7th of Romans to advanced believers."

In order to guide our thinking in an attempt at unravelling the complex situation and experience described in the section, the following points should be noted:

a. The verb tenses are all in the present. This is in marked contrast to the preceding paragraph where all the verbs are in the past tense. In that paragraph the Apostle is quite obviously relating his experience before and leading to his conversion. His experience detailed in verses 7-13 dovetail into or synchronizes with the illustration given in verses 1-6. Having been slain or executed, the law ceased to have dominion over him.

b. He speaks of the "inward man" a phrase only found twice elsewhere in the New Testament. In Corinthians 4:16 the same Apostle speaks of the outward man as perishing, but of the "inward man" as being renewed daily. Then in the Ephesian encyclical he prays for his readers that they might be "strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man" (ch. 3:16). In both of these cases the term can only apply to believers. It is difficult to interpret it otherwise in Romans 7. To equate the words with a more mental approval militates against the analogy of these other Scriptures. Moreover, the "mind of the flesh," the only mind the unregenerate man has, is enmity with God, hence it cannot delight in the law of God. In Romans 7 Paul not only approves of the law and its demands, he delights in it (Comp. Ps. 1.). Is such an experience within the range of possibility to an unregenerate person? Scripture teaching would not lead us to think so.

c. The deliverance he cries out for is not deliverance from the law of sin in the members, but from this “body of death.” As long as he was in the body co-existence with the law of sin which is in its members was unavoidable. The cry and the expression of thanks point to the coming of the Lord and the references to it in Chapter 8 as taught by the late W. E. Vine in his commentary on this Epistle, and also by the late C. F. Hogg.

d. The final words of the chapter are a summing up of the experience described in the earlier verses: “So with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.” Here as before, the Apostle speaking as a representative believer, sums up in the concluding statement his line of argument (WE-V). The words “I myself” would suggest that Paul was anxious that we should understand this as his normal experience. The words cannot represent the experience of the unconverted. They depict a dualism which is only true of the regenerate. A closer study of the portion will confirm this conclusion.

We know intuitively that the law is spiritual. It is all that Paul acknowledged it to be, “holy, just and good.” “But, I am carnal, sold under sin.” This is considered by many to be an insuperable difficulty making it impossible to interpret it as the experience of a true believer, far less of a spiritually minded believer. However, we do well to note, as pointed out by Calvin in his commentary on Romans, that the word used here for “carnal” refers to the flesh in its material rather than in its ethical sense. It is the word used in Corinthians 3, where we read of the “fleshy tablets of the heart.” Paul does not say that he was carnally minded like the Corinthians, but he

acknowledged that he was still in the body, and as yet not redeemed. For that the believer waits.

In verses 15-17 the problem is viewed negatively. He finds that he is unable to resist doing what he knows to be wrong, that is, desiring or coveting the forbidden thing. In verses 18-20 it is viewed from the positive aspect or standpoint. He acknowledges that he is unable to do that which he knows to be right. In verses 16 and 20 he gives his conclusions: “If then I do that which I would not …” I confess two things: (1) The law with its prohibitions is good. (2) My failure is due to indwelling sin.

It is clear that the portion speaks of a conflict of desires, of an irreconcilable dualism in the Apostle’s life, and he has recorded for us that which he learned in this severe school of discipline. The lessons he learned were both humbling and salutary. We do well to take heed to them.

a. “I know that in me, that is, in my flesh dwelleth no good thing.” This is a lesson of primary importance. It was the lesson that led Job to confess, “Therefore I abhor myself,” and Peter to say, “I am a sinful man, O Lord.” It is the message of Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” It is incurably evil.

b. “I find then a law that when I would do good, evil is present with me.” “I see another law in my members,” a contrary law which wages constant warfare against the law of my mind, and seeks to reduce me to captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. He discovered that he had a bias toward this law of sin, and inclination to obey it. It was natural for him to submit to its edicts or commands.

c. “So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.” He learnt that the flesh in him would own allegiance to no other master than sin. This he repeats in chapter 3-7. “For the mind of the flesh is enmity against God.” The flesh can never be converted. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” It is as evil and incorrigible in its working in the oldest and most mature saint as it is in the youngest believer.

The message of Romans 7 is one which no Christian can afford to ignore. He will do so at his peril. It is the red flag of warning waved by none other than the great Apostle himself. On the fifth day of creation fish, great whales, and fowl were created. On the sixth there was the same dual type of life, beasts and creeping things. Then man was created and placed in authority over them all. In Romans 7 we have this dualism. To take a census of the life which abounds in the sea is beyond man’s power. These can be taken to represent the hidden motives, both good and bad. Among the birds of the air there are also the clean and the unclean. They are suggestive of what passes through the mind. The Apostle elsewhere refers to the “desires of the flesh and of the mind” (Eph. 2:3). Creeping things are defiling. Food vessels were to be covered lest any should fall into them (Num. 19:15. Lev. 11:29-33).

The experience of Romans 7 may well be illustrated by that of Israel in the wilderness. But in this connection we need to remember that while Israel was in Egypt, the Wilderness, and Canaan at successive periods; the believer is in each at the same time. The nation literally and physically went out of Egypt into the

Wilderness, and later they literally left the Wilderness and entered into the Canaan. But that is not the case with the Christian. He is in the world though not of it, and is assured of preservation from its doom by the blood of the lamb. In the Wilderness he finds every provision for his spiritual needs, and in the land he enjoys all the spiritual blessings with which the believer has been blessed in the heavenlies in Christ. Of the Wilderness God said: “The Lord thy God led thee … in the Wilderness to humble thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart” (Deut. 8:1-3). This is the lesson of Romans 7.

The cry from the depths and its answers (7:24-25 and ch. 8):

“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” This seems like a cry of despair wrung from the depths of his anguished spirit. It echoes the cry of the Psalmist: “Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee.” The body, previously referred to as the “body of sin” and the “mortal body” is now referred to as “this body of death.” And he yearned for deliverance from IT, not merely from the law of sin which was engraved on its members. The Apostle would seem to be thinking in terms of the Roman custom of binding the corpse of the victim to the back of the ciminal. The picture is a very graphic one. Had the words been “HOW shall I be delivered?” They would have suggested that he was looking either within himself or elsewhere for some way of deliverance. Having learnt the futility of all self-effort, he does not look for victory but for deliverance. Victory is something which we may bring about, but deliverance is something which is wrought entirely for us by another.

This deliverance, this emancipation from the body of death, is to be ours at the rapture, the coming again of our Lord.