

# New Covenant Theology



# New Covenant Theology

questions answered

Steve Lehrer

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# *Acknowledgements*

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Writing a book has been a far more arduous and lengthy endeavor than I had ever imagined. It is also far less a solitary endeavor than I ever thought.

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So many of my friends have helped by editing, encouraging, and giving feedback relating to this book. I appreciate all of them immensely.

The In-Depth Studies website has been online since 1995. The penetrating theological questions from those who have come across our site over the years have played a large part in forming the book's content and structure.

I am also grateful for my church family at New Covenant Bible Fellowship in Tempe, Arizona. They have shared their lives with me and loved me. Their discerning questions about how Scripture fits together as well as their constant desire to see how my answers apply to their lives have also helped to shape this book.

My precious wife, Michelle, as always is my faithful partner in ministry. She has not only been patient when I have been preoccupied with writing this book, but she has spent countless hours editing and re-editing each and every word of this book as well as formatting it to make it look presentable. Her care for detail in the midst of caring for our two kids and me has been amazing to watch. I can truly say that without her love and hard work I could never have written this book.



# *Foreword*

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As a proponent of New Covenant Theology and the founder of In-Depth Studies,<sup>1</sup> it is exciting for me to be able to write the foreword to this book. My current understanding of New Covenant Theology is really the result of a theological journey that began many years ago. In 1975 I graduated from Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Soon after that I became a Presbyterian pastor in what is now the Presbyterian Church in America. After teaching and wrestling with Scripture, I changed my view on baptism and found myself unemployed and in theological no-man's land. I embraced the Covenant Theology that I learned in seminary, but I rejected one of the implications of that system of theology—infant baptism. As the years clipped by, I began to realize that I was living with many unexamined presuppositions from my seminary days about how the Bible fits together, particularly as it relates to covenants. So I started to study how Scripture fits together. In this process I compared what I was finding in Scripture and in the writings of John Reisinger and Jon Zens with Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Reisinger, Zens, and, of course, the Bible were the key influences on my thinking that sent me head first into New Covenant Theology. Along the way, I began a small teaching ministry called the Whitfield Society, which is now known as In-Depth Studies (IDS). The purpose for which IDS exists is to equip believers with a theological foundation. The teaching style of IDS is interactive because I believe that God-honoring discussion is the best way for people to grow. The people I interact with through IDS come from a variety of different theological backgrounds and their questions always push me to examine and re-examine whether or not my theology agrees with Scripture. Over the years, I have discovered that the freedom to reconsider and change my theology when I find that it is not in agreement with God's Word is

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ids.org](http://www.ids.org)

a spiritual adventure in which the benefits far outweigh any other considerations.

I first met Steve Lehrer thirteen years ago, not long after he became a Christian. Seven years later he came to work for IDS with me. Since that time we have traveled the globe together equipping believers and wrestling through our understanding of the Scriptures. Like me, Steve received his formal theological training in Covenant Theology (he graduated from Westminster Seminary California). He brings to the study of New Covenant Theology a very analytical mind, a willingness to be questioned about his understanding of Scripture, and a deep love for his Lord. I believe this book is an important contribution to the world of Christian theology written by the right person. Steve was disciplined in New Covenant Theology, trained in Covenant Theology, and has become thoroughly familiar with Dispensationalism. Having worked with him for several years, I have seen his interactive style of teaching force him to answer the hard questions at every turn. As a result, Steve has the ability to communicate his understanding of New Covenant Theology in a clear and engaging fashion that is challenging to the reader.

With his easy-to-read style and his question and answer method, Steve takes us through the system of New Covenant Theology as a seasoned tour guide takes a group of tourists through a building that he knows intimately. He shows us how one corridor leads to another and he stops here and there to explain interesting features along the way. He tackles the toughest questions with clear biblical answers, and with an eye toward practical application.

It is absolutely crucial that believers have the right tools to handle Scripture accurately so that they might love the God of Scripture more and more. New Covenant Theology opens up the Bible in a clear and easy to understand fashion so that all believers can grasp and marvel at God's unfolding plan and what He requires of them. It is at this point that some readers might object to the very idea of studying a system of theology. In anticipation of this and in keeping with the method used throughout this book, I will address this in a question and answer format.

**Question: New Covenant Theology is a system of theology. Why do we need a system of theology?**

A common response to the above question is “We don’t. Let’s just be biblical.” My response is that this sounds nice but is practically unworkable. If I were to ask someone if they believe in Jesus I would get an overwhelming response in the affirmative. But, if I asked those same folks the question, “Do you believe that Jesus is the one true God?” To this question I would get a far different response. The reason for this is that many folks who embrace Jesus do not embrace the fact that He is God in the flesh. To the question, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ alone to save you from your sins?” I would get an even smaller amount of affirmative responses. This makes it clear that doctrinal questions need clarifying comments if they are to be truly helpful. So, if I ask you what you believe and you say “I am just biblical—I believe what the Bible says” then you are simply begging the question. The moment you begin to answer my next question, “What do you think the Bible says?” you begin to define your “theological system.”

All individuals bring some biblical ideas with them when they seek to interpret a particular biblical text. A theological presupposition is a truth that someone is already convinced that the Bible teaches. I am convinced that the Bible teaches that God determines all things before they happen and that His determination is not based on what might happen in the future. So when I come across a verse of Scripture that could either affirm or deny this truth, I will always opt for the interpretation that supports my theological presupposition. If my theological presupposition is wrong then my interpretation will be wrong. When we say that we hold to a particular theological system, we are just giving our hearers a view of our theological presuppositions so that they can understand what we are already convinced Scripture says and what ideas (hopefully biblical ideas) we will be using to interpret particular verses in Scripture.

If all of Scripture is the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17) then it cannot contain any true contradictions, for a contradiction is a false statement and the God of heaven and earth cannot lie (Titus 1:2). If there can be no contradictions in the Bible then we must be able to harmonize all the parts of the Bible with each other. That is why we should expect the Bible to make sense from beginning to end. A system of theology is just someone’s or some group’s opinion as to how the Bible fits together from beginning to end.

Consider the topic of “giving” as an example of the need for systematic thought when studying Scripture. When we study the subject of law in Scripture we need to clarify which law we are talking about. For the purposes of this article let’s talk about the Mosaic Law. How we view the purpose of the Mosaic Law is crucial to our understanding as to whether or not that law is still applicable to me today. Let’s take the specific law of tithing as an example. Should I or should I not be bound by the law of tithing today? This question is answered by my understanding of the purpose of the Mosaic Law today. I understand that the Mosaic Law is tied to the Old Covenant and that the Old Covenant came to an end at the cross (Luke 23:45, Hebrews 8:7-13, Galatians 4:21-31). Therefore, since the Old Covenant has come to an end the law of that covenant, the Mosaic Law, has also come to an end (Ephesians 2:14-16). So unless the law of Christ, the law in the New Covenant era, mentions the tithe (and it does not), I would assume that the law of the tithe is not binding on me. This understanding of Scripture that I also think of as “just being biblical” is part of the theological system that I believe is biblical. It is the view of the Mosaic Law and giving according to New Covenant Theology.

Everyone who reads and thinks about Scripture holds to some sort of a system of theology. Some are not aware that they hold to a system of theology. But it is impossible to *not* hold to a system of theology because every time you open your Bible to read, you think about what those Scriptures mean in relation to others you have read. You may do so without trying. You may do so and be totally inconsistent. But you do it. The important point that must always be kept in mind is that one must always be willing to reevaluate his theological presuppositions to see if they are truly biblical. One must always base his interpretation on the use of Scripture in context and not by imposing his theological system on the text. For it is always possible that the system is not biblical at a particular point. Our plea for the defense of a theological system is based on the fact that everyone, even those who claim to “just be biblical,” bring their theological presuppositions with them in their quest to interpret a particular passage of scripture.

The question is not, “Do you hold to a theological system or are you just biblical?” but rather, “Is your theological system *biblical*?”

In the unfolding of New Covenant Theology in recent years, good books have been written. But there still remains a need for a complete

## Foreword

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and balanced presentation of New Covenant Theology that is clear and concise. This book satisfies that need. It is only the first of many, but as the first, it fulfills the task of sketching out the system. Therefore, I recommend this book to you. It is my prayer that as you read and ponder about how God's plan fits together, you will grow to love the God of Scripture in a deeper way than ever before.

Geoff Volker  
Founder and Director of In-Depth Studies, 2006



# *Introduction*

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*It's game day! As you enter the crowded stadium, you buy a program that explains the overall plan for the big game. The program doesn't provide every detail of the game, but it gives you enough information so you won't be confused when the game begins.*

*After you enter the stadium and make your way to your seat, the first thing you notice is the field where the game will be played.*

*As you are reading your program, suddenly the pre-game preparation begins. The game has not yet begun as outlined in the program, but the players are gathered together on the appropriate sides of the field and they begin to warm up for the game. The pre-game preparation is vital to the success of the game, but it is not the game itself.*

*Finally the game begins. As the game progresses, someone comes to your seat from time to time and gives you additions to the program. These additions do not replace your program, but they provide more detailed information as the game progresses and are useful in understanding why things occur in the game the way they do. They help you to see more clearly what is happening at every point in the game. Soon, you have in your possession a large number of additions to the original program and as you sort through them, you realize that there has been no activity on the field for quite some time. Likewise, no one has come to your seat with more additions to the program in quite some time. Following a lengthy delay, you begin to wonder if the game is over. While musing about whether or not the game is finished, an announcer comes over the PA system proclaiming the start of the second half of the game. Such an announcement has peaked your interest because until that point you had no idea that the game was going to be played in two halves. The additions to the program you've received so far haven't been clear enough to lead you to that conclusion.*

*A short time after the start of the second half, someone comes to your seat and gives you one final addition to the program. It is only after you receive*

*this final addition that you fully understand what the game is all about. What you understood in a limited way prior to receiving the final addition, you now understand fully and are able to make sense of both how the game is played and its intent. As you read the program in its fullness, you realize that the game is being played in two halves. The first half is finished and the second half is now underway. Now you understand that the first half was only the beginning of the game, not the entire game as you initially assumed. In fact, the first half is incomplete without the second half. Now it is clear to you that the first half cannot be understood correctly without the final addition to the program provided during the second half. It is the second half that brings the game to its conclusion.*

\* \* \*

What you just read is my favorite illustration for explaining how Scripture fits together or New Covenant Theology (NCT). We'll return to this illustration with some explanation a bit later. Although there is an ever-growing number of works being published that are about NCT or books that come from that perspective, the dominant systems of biblical interpretation are still Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Both of these systems have scores of books that define their understanding of Scripture. No such book has been written about NCT<sup>2</sup>, until now.

The New Covenant is nothing other than the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Hebrews 8:6-13, 10:11-18). NCT is simply a view of how the Bible fits together wherein the person and work of Jesus Christ is the hub of the wheel around which everything else turns. But that is a very general statement. How can we more specifically define NCT? Well, I wrote this entire book in order to answer that question! But embracing a system of theology is in many ways similar to buying a car. Although it is helpful, even essential, to look under the hood of a car at some point and to find out how many cylinders it has and what condition the belts are in, that is not the first thing that most people want to do. No one ever bought a car because it had beautiful cylinders and belts. The first thing most of us do when considering a car we want to buy is stand back and see what it looks like from a distance. The details are

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<sup>2</sup> The most recent book by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel (*New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*, New Covenant Media: Fredrick, Maryland, 2002) is primarily explaining and defending NCT's view of the law.

important, but it is essential that we see what it looks like as a whole. In the rest of this book we will be looking at the details of NCT so you can kick the tires, get your hands greasy looking at the engine, and take it for a test drive, but right now I want you to be able to see it from a distance and get a view of the theological shape and color of NCT. NCT can be explained simply and briefly under the following seven headings:

### **The Cross**

By his death on the cross Jesus purchased both complete forgiveness of sins past, present, and future as well as a changed life or new heart for all those for whom He died. Believers love Christ more than sin and are characterized by repentance when they sin. Christ's work on the cross is the New Covenant.

### **Abrahamic Covenant**

The Abrahamic covenant reveals God's plan to save a people and take them into His land. The Old Covenant with the nation of Israel and the Promised Land is a temporary picture of what is accomplished by the New Covenant, by which Jesus actually purchased a people and will take them to be with Him forever in the new heavens and new earth.

### **Old Covenant**

The Old or Mosaic Covenant is a legal or works covenant that God made with Israel on Mount Sinai. This covenant is brought to an end and is fulfilled at the cross. It was never intended to save people, but instead its purpose was to increase sin and guilt until the coming of the Savior. Israel, under the Mosaic Covenant, was the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

### **New Covenant**

The New Covenant is a gracious covenant. By that I mean that those included in the covenant are reconciled to God by grace alone apart from anything they do. Jesus purchased a people by His death on the cross so that all those for whom He died receive full forgiveness of sins and become incurable God-lovers by the Holy Spirit. The New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

### **Israel and the Church**

Israel in the Old Covenant era was a temporary, unbelieving picture of the true people of God, the church. There always existed a small remnant of believers within unbelieving Israel. When Jesus Christ came, the picture of the people of God gave way to the true people of God consisting of both Jews and Gentiles.

### **Law**

The version of law in the Old Covenant era was the Mosaic Law, which included the Ten Commandments. The Mosaic Law has passed away with the coming of Christ and the New Covenant. God no longer requires people to follow the Mosaic Law. The version of law in the New Covenant era is the Law of Christ, which includes the commands of Christ that pertain to the New Covenant era and the commands of his Apostles.

### **Circumcision and Baptism**

Under the Old Covenant, circumcision was the physical picture of regeneration. It signified that a person was physically born into the unbelieving people of God, Israel. It was given to all Israelites, irrespective of repentance and faith. Under the New Covenant, baptism is the outward sign that regeneration has occurred. It signifies that you have been spiritually born into the believing people of God, the church. It is given to all those who give evidence of regeneration, which is repentance and faith.

The seven headings above are not meant to be exhaustive with respect to the distinctives of NCT. But the cross and the covenants that are mentioned above explain the basic building blocks of the system, while the brief explanations of law, Israel, circumcision, and baptism explain some of the practical implications that flow out of those basic building blocks.

Now that you have a basic idea of NCT as it relates to some of the major issues in Scripture, let's return to the previous illustration. Sometimes Scripture can be confusing because the Bible is a big book, and many of the concepts are unfamiliar to us. But almost everyone has seen a football game—even if your version of football is soccer! I have

found what I call “The Football Illustration”<sup>3</sup> to be particularly helpful for understanding NCT and seeing the big picture of how Scripture fits together.<sup>4</sup> The illustration is written in italics. All non-italic text is explanation or interpretation of the illustration.

\* \* \*

*It’s game day! As you enter the crowded stadium, you buy a program that explains the overall plan for the big game. The program doesn’t provide every detail of the game, but it gives you enough information so you won’t be confused when the game begins.*

The program represents the Abrahamic Covenant, and it tells you in very simple terms what God is going to do in the “game.” The game is the history of redemption: God’s plan to save a people worked out in real time. The Abrahamic Covenant lays out God’s plan to save a people and bring them into a land.

*After you enter the stadium and make your way to your seat, the first thing you notice is the field where the game will be played.*

The field represents the earth. God guarantees that the earth will remain until He is done saving a people and bringing them into His land in the Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:8-17).

*As you are reading your program, suddenly the pre-game preparation begins. The game has not yet begun as outlined in the program, but the players are gathered together on the appropriate sides of the field and they*

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of “The Football Illustration” originally sprung from the creative mind of Geoff Volker, founder of In-Depth Studies. Michael W. Adams, a teacher for In-Depth Studies, was the first to put the idea down on paper. I have revised and expanded the illustration into the version you see here.

<sup>4</sup> The different parts of the illustration only have the theological meaning specified. Don’t look for any further meaning in the illustration. When Jesus Christ says, “I am the gate” (John 10:7), He is saying that He is like a gate only in a particular sense, which is clearly laid out in the context in which He uses the metaphor. We are not supposed to speculate about the meaning of the hinges on the gate. Christ only intended those aspects of the metaphor to have meaning that he specified to have meaning. In the same way, I am comparing a football game to God’s work in redemptive history and how the covenants fit together only in the ways specified in the illustration and the explanation.

*begin to warm up for the game. The pre-game preparation is vital to the success of the game, but it is not the game itself.*

The pre-game preparation period represents the book of Genesis up through Exodus 19. In the pre-game or patriarchal period, God is preparing both the earth and the people for their part in God's work of redeeming a people for Himself. He moves them where they need to be in order to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham to save a people and bring them into His land.

*Finally the game begins. As the game progresses, someone comes to your seat from time to time and gives you additions to the program. These additions do not replace your program, but they provide more detailed information as the game progresses and are useful in understanding why things occur in the game the way they do. They help you to see more clearly what is happening at every point in the game. Soon, you have in your possession a large number of additions to the original program and as you sort through them, you realize that there has been no activity on the field for quite some time. Likewise, no one has come to your seat with more additions to the program in quite some time. Following a lengthy delay, you begin to wonder if the game is over. While musing about whether or not the game is finished, an announcer comes over the PA system proclaiming the start of the second half of the game. Such an announcement has peaked your interest because until that point you had no idea that the game was going to be played in two halves. The additions to the program you've received so far haven't been clear enough to lead you to that conclusion.*

The additions to the program at this point in the game are the Old Testament scriptures, which were not given all at once, but were provided in small portions over time (Hebrews 1:1). The lengthy delay is the intertestamental period in which God does not give any new revelation for about 400 years. Without the new revelation a reader of the Old Testament might begin to wonder if God is finished with Israel after their repeated rebellion and the Divine judgment that they received. The announcement that there will be a second half represents John the Baptist and the period of the incarnation. This was a period in which the Old Covenant was still in force but Jesus was coming to announce the New Covenant that was to be inaugurated by His death and resurrection.

*A short time after the start of the second half, someone comes to your seat and gives you one final addition to the program. It is only after you receive this final addition that you fully understand what the game is all about. What you understood in a limited way prior to receiving the final addition, you now understand fully and are able to make sense of both how the game is played and its intent. As you read the program in its fullness, you realize that the game is being played in two halves. The first half is finished and the second half is now underway. Now you understand that the first half was only the beginning of the game, not the entire game as you initially assumed. In fact, the first half is incomplete without the second half. Now it is clear to you that the first half cannot be understood correctly without the final addition to the program provided during the second half. It is the second half that brings the game to its conclusion.*

The first half of the game represents the Old Covenant; the second half represents the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is not the New and the New is not the Old, but understanding how they fit together is crucial to understanding God's overall plan. The Old isn't called "Old" until the New begins. The additions to the program given in the second half of the game represent the scriptures of the New Covenant era, the New Testament. Without them, the game cannot be correctly understood (Ephesians 3:2-6; Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Only after receiving them do you realize that God's plan to save a people and bring them into His land (the Abrahamic Covenant) contains both the Old and New Covenants and that one is a picture of the other. If you read the Old Testament in isolation from the New Testament, which is what everyone had to do prior to the writing of the New Testament, you might begin to wonder if God's work in redeeming a people was over because God was already faithful in creating a physical people and bringing them into a physical land. But the New Testament gives you more information about God's intentions. The Old Covenant was only a physical picture of what God was going to do in the New Covenant through the sacrifice of His only Son. What was written in the Abrahamic Covenant (God's intention to save a people and bring them into a land) ultimately applies to a spiritual people, the church, in a spiritual land, heaven (Hebrews 4:1-11; 11:40). This wasn't fully revealed until the New Testament Scriptures were written.

\* \* \*

Now that you have seen NCT from a distance and you see the basic color and shape of this system of theology, I invite you to read the rest of this book and look at the details. Test it by the Scriptures and see if this system of theology accurately reflects what is written in God's Word. I wrote this book in a question and answer format so that it would be very accessible and so that it could be read in small sips and pondered. It is divided into five sections with two appendices at the end. Section one considers questions about covenants. This section sets the biblical foundations for how the covenants fit together and it also deals with differing understandings of covenants in Scripture. Section two is concerned with questions about Israel. Israel is a major theme in Scripture, and this section attempts to explain why Israel is so important and how NCT interprets the Scriptures that pertain to Israel in both the Old and New Testaments. In section three, I answer the various questions about how NCT explains biblical law. Law has been the hill upon which many swords have been drawn between NCT and Covenant Theology. I attempt to answer any and all questions about this controversial topic with as much light and as little heat as I can muster. In section four, I answer questions about how NCT deals with the Sabbath. The theology of Sabbath as it relates to covenant and fulfillment, the role of apostolic tradition as it relates to the Lord's Day, and the function of gathering together are crucial issues for believers to grapple with as they seek to love God and His people. In Section five, I address miscellaneous questions that do not fit in the other sections. These are some of the questions that are most often raised by people trying to understand NCT. I included two appendices to show how NCT makes sense out of some of the most difficult passages of Scripture. The first appendix, "Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament? Examining Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:23-29," explores the Old Testament quotations in Romans 9:23-29 and gives a method to Paul's apparent madness. In the second appendix, "Should We Say 'I Hate You', in Jesus' Name? How to Think About the War Psalms in the New Covenant Era," I consider how to understand those controversial Psalms in which the Psalmist seems to hate his enemies. Both appendices are designed not only to show how NCT makes sense of these difficult passages but also to show how

understanding NCT makes these passages, which can be simply confusing, precious and encouraging.

The chapters of this book need not be read in sequence. You might be interested in a particular topic—Israel, law, or covenants—or a particular question—“How were believers saved in Old Testament times?” or “How do the Abrahamic, Old, and New Covenants fit together?” Regardless of where you begin, I pray that you will be challenged to think about these issues, dig into the Scriptures, and grow to love God more because you read this book.



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**SECTION 1**

*Questions  
About*

**COVENANTS**



# *Chapter 1*

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## How Do The Abrahamic, Old, And New Covenants Fit Together?

Much of Scripture is devoted to explaining or recording how God fulfills the promises He made to Abraham. People get confused as to exactly how the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled and how it relates to other covenants. The Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. That is, the Old and New Covenants are the physical and spiritual fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant God made with Abraham reveals God's plan to save a people and bring them into His land. Under the Old Covenant, God physically saves the people of Israel (the physical descendants of Abraham) from the Egyptians and brings them into the Promised Land, Palestine. Under the New Covenant, God spiritually saves His people (the spiritual descendants of Abraham) from sin and condemnation and brings them into the spiritual land (salvation rest now and in heaven). Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant "contains" both the Old and the New Covenants. Let me show you how it all fits together.

### **The Abrahamic Covenant Physically Fulfilled**

When we read about Israel under the Mosaic Covenant, we are actually reading the historical record of God's physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. Under the Old Covenant God brings the physical descendants of Abraham into the land He promised them and gives them physical rest. As we examine the Abrahamic Covenant, we find that physical or blood relationship to Abraham is a dominant theme. All of the physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah were included in the

covenant made with Abraham. Belief was not necessary. It was through physical birth that one became part of the Abrahamic Covenant in its physical form. Let's look at the promises God made to Abraham:

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (Genesis 15:1-7).

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:1-8).

God promises Abraham that he will have many physical descendants. He promises Abraham that his offspring will not only be extremely numerous but that they will possess the land of Canaan. The capstone promise is that God "will be their God." These are big and important promises that are repeated throughout the book of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> How and when were they fulfilled?

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<sup>5</sup> Abraham's descendants would become a great nation (Genesis 12:2, 13:16, 15:5, 16:10, 18:18). His descendants would possess the Promised Land (Genesis 12:7, 15:18-21, 17:8). They would be God's own people (Genesis 17:2, 7-8, 18:19).

### The Promise of “Many Descendants” Physically Fulfilled

The nation of Israel was made up of the physical descendants of Abraham. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of “many descendants” could not be more clearly fulfilled than in the soon-to-be nation of Israel in bondage to the Egyptians:

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much **too numerous for us**. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, **the more they multiplied and spread**; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites (Exodus 1:6-13).

### The Promise “I Will Be Their God” Physically Fulfilled

The nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era enjoyed special national status and a type of adoption by God. Deuteronomy 7 is a great example of this fact:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

God had a relationship with the Israelites that He did not have with any of the other nations in the world at that time. It was not a saving relationship in which the Israelites were spiritually redeemed (Hebrews 3:19), but the entire nation was physically redeemed and chosen to be the recipients of God’s love in a way that no one else was at that time. God protected them and fought on their side. He talked to them and gave them the Scriptures. He used Israel to bring the Messiah into the world.

### **The Promise of “Possession of the Land” Physically Fulfilled**

Old Covenant Israel enjoyed physical rest in the land of Canaan. In fact, the book of Joshua tells us that when the Israelites had finally taken most of the land, all of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

Nothing else needed to happen for God to make good on His word to Abraham. His promises of rest and possession of the land had been fulfilled, just like his promises of many descendants and a special relationship with God. It was all fulfilled by the time of the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua.

### **The Abrahamic Covenant Spiritually Fulfilled**

The New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Under the New Covenant God gives birth to the spiritual descendants of Abraham. These descendants get an everlasting possession of a spiritual land (also presented as spiritual rest in the New Testament). They are also brought into a relationship with God or adopted by Him. God promises to love them forever and to never punish them.

### **The Promise of “Many Descendants” Spiritually Fulfilled**

In the Abrahamic Covenant, God promised Abraham “many descendants” or “seeds,” which pointed ahead to Jesus Christ, the one true Seed of Abraham. No one would have understood that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise without God revealing that truth through the New Covenant Scriptures. God promised Abraham many physical descendants. Let’s look specifically at the promise again: “He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—If indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring (seed) be’” (Genesis 15:5). When Moses wrote Genesis 15, he employed the word “seed” as a collective singular. We use collective singulars all the time in the English language. For example, “I went out to the plant

nursery to pick up a bag of grass *seed*.” When I say that, everyone knows that I did not go out and get a bag with one giant grass seed in it, but rather a bag filled with thousands and thousands of individual grass seeds. I used a singular noun to refer to a whole collection of the same kind of object. In the same way, Paul capitalizes on Moses’ use of a collective singular in his divinely inspired interpretation of Genesis 15:5 in the book of Galatians. In Galatians chapter 3, Paul sets out to explain the relationship of the Old Covenant to the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

What is a responsible interpreter to do with such an apparent discrepancy? The Genesis context absolutely and unequivocally demands a collective singular which gives the meaning “many descendants,” while Galatians refers to one descendant. The answer is this: Paul is giving the final purpose of the text. This is legitimately a *second* divinely inspired meaning of the text.<sup>6</sup> It is the meaning of the text in its fulfillment. It is what the text always pointed towards. The promise of offspring to Abraham is finally fulfilled in Christ. But that is not all. Paul goes on to identify all those who trust in Christ alone to be the spiritual seed of Abraham: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28, 29). Paul lets us know that being a seed or descendant of Abraham in the New Covenant sense has nothing to do

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<sup>6</sup> I part ways with Louis Berkhof when he writes: “Properly understood, *the deeper sense of the Bible does not constitute a second sense*. It is in all cases based on the literal, and is the proper sense of Scripture. The real meaning of Scripture does not always lie on the surface. There is no truth in the assertion that the intent of the secondary authors, determined by the grammatico-historical method, always exhausts the sense of Scripture, and represents in all its fullness the meaning of the Holy Spirit. Many of the Old Testament types pointed ultimately to New Testament realities; many prophecies found their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ, no matter how often they had obtained partial fulfillment; and many of the Psalms give utterance to the joy and sorrow, not merely of the poets, but of the people of God as a whole, and, in some cases, of the suffering and triumphant Messiah. These considerations lead us to what may be called, the deeper sense of Scripture” (Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992 (1950)], pp. 59-60).

Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 15:5 is God’s intention for the spiritual fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. But it is hard to avoid understanding this as anything other than a non-literal and or “second sense” in which the text is to be read.

with blood relation to Abraham as it did in the Old Covenant era. All of those who belong to Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, are the true recipients of the promise spoken to Abraham. Jesus Christ and the church are the spiritual or New Covenant fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of many descendants.

### **The Promise “I Will Be Their God” Spiritually Fulfilled**

The relationship of God to the physical nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era was qualitatively different from His relationship to all those who are in the New Covenant. The Israelites were “loved,” “chosen,” and “redeemed” by God, but most of them are in hell because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:19). God did not set His saving love on all of those people. God did not choose Israel the nation in the same sense He chose believers before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Ephesians 1:4). Most of the Israelites<sup>7</sup> in the Old Covenant era were what theologians categorize as “historically elect,” chosen to play a particular part in God’s plan of redemption. They were physically redeemed but not spiritually redeemed. Certainly these people did not deserve the amazing favor God bestowed on them. He gave them the Old Covenant, which has types and shadows of the gospel. No one else in the world had these types and shadows.

In Hebrews 8:7-12, the author describes the New Covenant and how it contrasts the Old or Mosaic Covenant:

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. 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 (v. 8, 9).

We must focus on how the New Covenant “will not be like” the Mosaic Covenant. In what way will it be different? The text goes on to spell it out: “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” (v. 10). Although Old Covenant Israel was God’s people and He was their God in a sense, there is another sense in which this was never

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<sup>7</sup> I say “most” because there was always a remnant of true believers within the nation of Israel who were saved by the work of Christ that was to be done years later (Romans 3:25).

accomplished in the Old Covenant era. That is what this passage is highlighting. It took the work of Christ on the cross, which established the New Covenant, to bring about the spiritual fulfillment of this Abrahamic promise. That is, Christ purchased complete forgiveness of sins and a God-loving heart for every last person in the New Covenant. The result of this is that unlike the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era, those in the New Covenant can actually approach God. God is no longer our eternal enemy but our loving Father and King. That is what it means for God to be our God.

In Hebrews 10, the author contrasts the work of Christ and the work of the priesthood of the Old Covenant. The Levitical priests were unable to make the believer acceptable to God, while Jesus' priestly work on the cross accomplished this:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Jesus Christ purchased the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. He paid the ultimate price so that we might be reconciled to God.

### **The Promise Of "Possession Of The Land" Spiritually Fulfilled**

The New Testament treats the land promise made to Abraham as a promise of true spiritual rest for God's true people. Joshua only gave them physical rest in the physical land. We saw that the Israelites did in fact receive this rest, but the author of the book of Hebrews tells us that Joshua never gave them true spiritual rest. Let's look at this apparent contradiction:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:8-11).

These Scriptures seem to be in direct conflict until we take into account the way *rest* and *land* are being interpreted in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. The wilderness generation in the book of Exodus was not allowed to "enter God's rest," meaning they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land. This is understood in Hebrews 3 to mean that they did not obtain salvation. Joshua, however, *did* take the Israelites into the Promised Land and they were given rest from their physical enemies! But the author of Hebrews is pointing past a physical fulfillment concerning physical land and rest from war to a spiritual rest. The promise of Canaan as an everlasting possession is finally and ultimately fulfilled with the everlasting possession of our eternal salvation.

In summary, understanding the relationship between the Abrahamic Covenant, the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant allows one to have a grasp on how Scripture fits together. The Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant is the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise and the New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment.

## *Chapter 2*

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### Is There A Covenant Of Redemption?

We do not believe that it is wise to refer to God's plan to save a people in eternity past as a "covenant." But we do believe that our one God who is three co-equal and co-eternal persons did make a perfect plan that He would save a people from their sins. But if this plan is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves. The reason we should only use the word "covenant" to describe events in Scripture that are actually called covenants is because of the importance of the word "covenant" in Scripture and the place of prominence the concept has in our theological systems. The danger of calling something a covenant that Scripture does not refer to as a covenant increases the likelihood of making something a cornerstone of our theology that in fact is not an emphasis in Scripture. This of course would lead to an unbalanced and unbiblical theological system.

We want to be very clear. We are not saying that you always have to use biblical terms to describe biblical concepts (even when those concepts are foundational to our theological systems). The Bible never uses the term 'person' when referring to the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Christians are justified in this application because the concept of the personhood of the Holy Spirit is clear in Scripture. We find that we are forced to acknowledge the personhood of the Holy Spirit from the clear teaching of Scripture. The evidence in Scripture does not allow us to believe that the Holy Spirit is simply an impersonal force. Some of these evidences are actions of the Holy Spirit that are driven by purpose and intelligence as well as the fact that the authors of Scripture referred to the Spirit by using personal pronouns like "him" and "his."

So the concept of the “personhood” of the Holy Spirit is an important doctrine although the term is never used to describe Him in Scripture. Thus, I think it can be a valid practice to understand a person or event in Scripture by using a term that Scripture does not in fact use to describe that person or event. The fundamental problem is *not* in assigning the word “covenant” to events in Scripture that Scripture itself does not call covenants, but rather the problem is the place you give those events in your theological system precisely *because* you designate them “covenants.” I think this happens very naturally because the term “covenant” in Scripture, unlike the term “person,” is a high profile and extremely important term. In Covenant Theology, the concept of covenant, whether it is the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, or the Covenant of Grace, is used to illustrate the continuity of Scripture and God’s work in salvation. But Scripture uses the term, almost without exception, to illustrate discontinuity.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, while NCT does believe that the Bible teaches that our Trinitarian God has always had a sure plan to redeem His chosen people from their sins, we think it is best not to refer to that concept as a covenant because it can lead to confusion about the basic building blocks of Scripture.

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Fredrick, Maryland: New Covenant Media, 2002), 281-283.

## Chapter 3

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### Did God Make A Covenant Of Works With Adam In The Garden?

Although there is some disagreement within Covenant Theology as to whether the law given in the garden to Adam can properly be considered a “Covenant of Works,” the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks directly to the matter in Chapter 7. Let’s take a close look at what the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith wrote on the subject:

7:2. The first covenant made with man was a Covenant of Works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

7:3. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace. wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.<sup>9</sup>

Not only do most Covenant Theologians hold to this view but many other theologians also believe that Scripture presents a Covenant of Works with Adam and that it is one of the basic building blocks of Scripture. Consider Wayne Grudem’s comments on the Covenant of Works in his excellent volume on systematic theology:

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<sup>9</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1995), 41, 42.

In this statement to Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die’ (Gen. 2:16-17)] there is a promise of punishment for disobedience—death...In the promise of punishment for disobedience there is implicit a promise of blessing for obedience. This blessing would consist of not receiving death, and the implication is that the blessing would be the opposite of receiving “death.” It would involve physical life that would not end and spiritual life in terms of a relationship with God that would go on forever. The presence of the ‘tree of life...in the midst of the garden’ (Gen. 2:9) also signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished. After the fall, God removed Adam and Eve from the garden, partly so that they would not be able to take from the tree of life ‘and eat, and live forever.’<sup>10</sup>

So it seems that this point of view is not necessarily exclusive to Covenant Theology. NCT, however, disagrees with those who hold to a Covenant of Works with Adam.

In order to set the stage as to why NCT does not agree with Covenant Theology on the presence of a Covenant of Works in the Garden, allow me to ask a question: “What will the weather be like in heaven?” I am fairly sure that there will have to be some form of weather in the new heavens and the new earth. Certainly we will have physical bodies that can enjoy it. Will it be sunny or rainy? Will it be a winter wonderland or a Mediterranean paradise? Perhaps since hell will be hot (or is that just a metaphor?), heaven will be cold. The answer for all of us who have not yet been to heaven is simple: “I don’t know what the weather in heaven will be because Scripture doesn’t tell us.” Scripture does speak about heaven, but God never tells us anything about the weather. Much of what was quoted above is like an answer to the question about weather in heaven—pure speculation. Who knows if it is right? The entire argument might be correct, but if what they say is not clearly stated in Scripture, then it is just pure speculation. It can neither be confirmed nor denied. It is uncheckable. In fact, if God does not deem it important enough even to tell us about issues like the weather in heaven or the so-called probation period of Adam, it is a safe to say that we don’t need to know about these things.

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<sup>10</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 516.

Those who believe in the Covenant of Works understand that within the arrangement between God and Adam there was an “implicit promise of blessing for obedience.” But our question is, “How can you be certain if it is not stated explicitly?” Above, Dr. Grudem, in agreement with Covenant Theologians, argues that the tree of life is that which “signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished.” It may seem like a logical deduction to connect the Tree of Life to a promise. But before we can make that connection, we must go to Scripture with these questions: Does Scripture tell us that the tree signified this? Does God’s Word say that there was a “time of testing” or “probation period” anywhere in the text of Genesis? Does God ever say that Adam only had to obey the command for a certain period of time? Does God ever say that if Adam did obey the commandment that God would allow him to eat from the tree of life? Does the text say that if Adam and Eve obeyed that they would be “established in righteousness forever and...have their fellowship with God made sure forever”? There might have been a probation period and there might have been a covenant, but if Scripture doesn’t tell us this, then we must not speculate about these things..

NCT does not believe that it is wise to refer to God’s relationship with Adam as a “covenant.” NCT holds that God gave Adam a command with a promise of punishment if broken. And because this situation is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves.

Let’s consider that most important and foundational question “Is it biblical?” Even if the relationship between God and Adam in the Garden is technically a covenant, God places no importance on that fact. If Scripture does not use the term “covenant” when referring to God’s relationship to Adam but uses it of other pivotal events, perhaps we should reserve the term for those events God calls covenants. Consider whether refraining from calling the arrangement a covenant would do damage to your theological system and whether your system in turn drives you to call God’s dealings with Adam a covenant.

## Rejecting the Covenant of Works Without Rejecting the Principle of Works

Salvation can “theoretically” be earned by perfect heart-act obedience to God. Conversely, even the smallest act of disobedience earns God’s infinite and eternal wrath. We do not need the “Covenant of Works” to embrace these facts. These statements actually have clear biblical foundations that can be verified by simple exegesis.

If we turn our attention to the Old Covenant and examine the nature of that covenant under which Christ was born, we will find that it was a “Covenant of Works.” That is, we find that the condition for blessing was perfect obedience to the commands of that Covenant and cursing and wrath followed violation of any of those commands:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:3-6).

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God...(Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...(Deuteronomy 28:15).

Although there are many places one could turn in the New Testament to support this doctrine, the book of Galatians is the *locus classicus*.<sup>11</sup> The book of Galatians is the great antidote for any fool who desires to earn God’s acceptance by works. Now, Paul does not rebuke the Galatians because salvation by works is an unbiblical concept. He rebukes them because it takes perfect obedience in order to gain eternal life by works. They should know this and they should realize that they are unable to achieve such a thing:

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<sup>11</sup> A *locus classicus* is the primary place in Scripture where a particular doctrine or concept is explained.

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Galatians 3:10-13).

If you desire to be saved, even just in part, by earning or meriting your salvation, then your salvation will not be gained by faith but by obedience to the law. But make no mistake—you actually have to “do” the law to be saved in this manner (v.12). James tells us that even one violation of God’s law is treated by God as if you violated every law: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10).

Many believers fear that if they deny the Covenant of Works schema, then they will have to abandon the crucial biblical understanding of the relationship of salvation and works as well as the seriousness of sin. But notice that establishing the biblical foundations of the relationship of salvation and works of the law, as we have done above, can be done without reference to a Covenant of Works made by God with Adam in the Garden. Establishing the biblical truth concerning our accountability to God for keeping His commands in the New Covenant era can also be done without reference to God’s relationship with Adam. Consider Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul is simply saying that when you break the commands that apply to you in the New Covenant era, what you earn from God is eternal wrath in hell. You get the curse of God unless Jesus Christ takes the curse in your place.

### **Answering Objections**

**Objection:** Hosea 6:7 clearly says that God made a covenant with Adam and Adam broke that covenant: “Like Adam, they have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there.”

**Answer:** First, we need to consider the options we have for translating this verse as all competent modern translations list in their footnotes. This verse can be rendered with the following options concerning the

phrase in question: “Like Adam (or “*as at Adam*” or “Like *men*”), they have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there.” Although, at first glance this text seems to say that there was a Covenant of Works that God made with Adam, a second glance may lead to another conclusion. Not only are there other interpretive options for this text, such as taking Adam as the name of a location (Joshua 3:16) at which some rebellion occurred, but also within the ranks of Covenant Theology there are many who do not see this text as supporting the existence of a Covenant of Works in the garden.<sup>12</sup> Even if one were to grant that this text does refer to the relationship in the garden between God and Adam (which is something this interpreter cannot grant), we must ask the question: Can this verse bear the full weight of the massive doctrine of the Covenant of Works in Covenant Theology?

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<sup>12</sup> As an example of this see “The Adamic Administration,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977], 47-59).

## Chapter 4

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### Is The Old Covenant A Covenant Of Works Or Grace?

What is meant by *works* and what is meant by *grace* in this question? By *works* I mean “earning God’s (spiritual saving) favor by obedience to God’s commands.” By *grace* I mean “God’s (spiritual saving) favor given as a free gift by God to people who deserve His wrath.” So let me restate the question:

**Is the Old Covenant a covenant in which you earn God’s (spiritual saving) favor by obedience to His commands or a covenant in which His (spiritual saving) favor is a free gift given to people who deserve His wrath?**

I am being very careful in the way that I qualify my statements for this reason: Covenant Theologians can be very unclear in their meaning of the terms redemption, deliverance, salvation, and grace when they write about the Old Covenant. Let me give you an example of this from Robert Reymond’s book *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. The following quote is found in the midst of Reymond’s section on the “Unity of the Covenant of Grace”:

2. The exodus redemption was accomplished by God’s almighty power and not by the strength of man (Exod. 3:19-20). Every detail of the exodus event was divinely arranged to highlight the great salvific truth that it is God who must save his people because they are incapable of saving themselves. God permitted Moses to attempt Israel’s **deliverance** at first by his own strategy and in his own strength, and allowed him to fail (Exod. 2:11-15; Acts 7:23-29). Then he sent Moses back to Egypt with the staff of

God in his hand to “perform miraculous signs with it” (Exod. 4:17). God himself promised, precisely in order to “multiply” his signs that he might place his power in the boldest possible relief and this in order that both Egypt and Israel would learn that he is God, that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart throughout the course of the plagues, and he did so (Exod. 7:3; 10:1-2; 11:9; see Rom. 9:17). And the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 has as its single theme the extolling of God for his mighty **power to save**. There should have been no doubt in anyone’s mind after the event whose power had effected Israel’s **redemption**.

3. The exodus **redemption**, notwithstanding the two previous facts that it sprang from God’s gracious elective purpose and was accomplished by the power of God, actually **delivered** only those who availed themselves of the **expiation of sin** afforded by the **efficacious** covering of the blood of the paschal lamb (Exod. 12:12-13, 21-23, 24-27). This truth underscores the fact that biblical **redemption is not simply deliverance by power but deliverance by price as well** (emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup>

Reymond writes about the physical “deliverance,” “redemption,” or “salvation” of the Israelites and easily slips into talking about eternal or spiritual salvation without making any qualifications. There is a need here for defining terms. What was the “redemption” the Israelites of the Exodus generation experienced? Was it spiritual redemption? Or was it simply physical redemption from the hands of Pharaoh, which is a picture of spiritual redemption? The author of Hebrews tells us that the Exodus generation perished “because of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:19). Reymond reads the Old Testament account of God’s physical deliverance of the Israelites, which is only a picture of spiritual deliverance, as if it was the spiritual New Covenant fulfillment. He reads New Covenant truths back into the Old Covenant event as if the Exodus was actually true spiritual redemption. But Scripture tells us this is not the case. God was kind to the Israelites in that they did not deserve God’s favor in liberating them from bondage in Egypt. But God did not give these folks the “grace” to savingly trust in Him. Scripture itself tells us that the Exodus generation did not enter the Promised Land because of unbelief, and those who die in unbelief go to hell and experience God’s eternal wrath. In fact we are warned not to be like these people who had so many spiritual benefits but were ultimately idolaters at their core:

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 519-520.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did (1 Corinthians 10:1-6).

It is a big mistake to speak about the unbelieving Israelites as if they experienced God's saving grace. God is loving to every unbeliever by giving each one life and breath here on earth while strict justice would demand that they be in hell right now (Matthew 5:43-45). In Reformed circles we refer to this kind of love as "common grace." Now God *did* do something for the Israelites that he did not do for the Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians or any other nation. He chose to give His word to them, to physically deliver them, and to pay special attention to them above and beyond everyone else in the world at that time. Should we call this, "special common grace?" Perhaps. Whatever we call it, we must not equate it with the special or saving grace God gives to His true people. Saving grace is that grace which guarantees that believers can never be lost or separated from God's love like the wilderness generation who were chosen by God and yet were punished by God. They were never recipients of God's special grace even though He "bore them on eagle's wings."

Now let's look at some evidence that the Mosaic Covenant is a Covenant of Works (a covenant in which you earn God's eternal favor by obedience to His commands). In order to prove that the Old Covenant is a Covenant of Works or a legal covenant, we need to look at specific texts to prove this and explain any texts that seem to point in another direction.

**Some Biblical Evidence that the Old Covenant is a Works Based Covenant**

*1. There is an "if, then" character to the Mosaic Covenant. If you obey, then you get God's favor.*

Remember, any arrangement that says our obedience to commands is how we acquire God's favor is a works based covenantal arrangement. Consider Exodus 19 in this regard:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, **then** out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:3-6).

The Israelites could become God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation, if, and only if, they fully obeyed and kept God's commands.

*2. The basic arrangement of the Mosaic Covenant is that "blessing results from full obedience and cursing results from disobedience."*

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks...However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out...(Deuteronomy 28:1-4, 15-19).

In this passage we see the "if, then" nature of the covenant worked out in much fuller detail. The Israelites could actually say that God was blessing them because they obeyed His commands or that He was cursing them because they had disobeyed. They "earned" either God's blessing or His cursing. When I use the word "earned" some people will immediately object because the Israelites only deserved God's wrath from the beginning. They did not deserve to have God enter into a relationship with them in the first place. This is true, but I think it misses the point. If I am an unskilled laborer guilty of crimes against the state and the state government chooses to overlook my crimes for the present and pay me \$1000 per hour to pick up any trash in my front

yard every day and help all old ladies cross the street in front of my house, I am simply a well-treated overpaid employee earning my wage. That seems to be the same kind of arrangement God made with Israel. Therefore, “earn” seems to be the appropriate verb to use when talking about the blessings and cursings of the Mosaic Covenant.

*3. The Israelites broke the Mosaic Covenant by disobeying the commands of that covenant and received the promised curses.*

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant—the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.' I said, 'Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey'-the land you possess today."

I answered, "Amen, LORD."

The LORD said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: 'Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them. From the time I brought your forefathers up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, "Obey me." But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep.' " Then the LORD said to me, "There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem. They have returned to the sins of their forefathers, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them (Jeremiah 11:1-11).

There is no clearer evidence that the Mosaic Covenant is based on works than this passage. Jeremiah 11 tells us that the Israelites broke the covenant because they disobeyed God’s commands. The Israelites were in a covenant relationship with God that could be severed because it was based on their obedience to His commands. They consistently disobeyed God’s commands revealed in the Mosaic Covenant and therefore they earned inescapable disaster and God’s refusal to listen to them.

### Answering Objections

**Objection:** If the Mosaic Covenant is a works-based covenant, how do you explain the sacrificial system?

**Answer:** The sacrificial system itself is based on works just as the Mosaic Covenant as a whole is based on works. The laws of the sacrificial system are all basically of the same nature: If you do x (x stands for any action the particular law regarding sacrifice demands) you receive forgiveness, including giving one of your own animals as a sacrifice for your sin. It is a tit for tat or a *quid pro quo* arrangement. In that sense, it is much like Roman Catholicism. If you sin as a Roman Catholic you go to confession and the priest gives you certain things to do in order to be pardoned. Let's look at an Old Covenant example of this in Leviticus 6:1-7:

The Lord said to Moses: "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do—when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering. And as a penalty he must bring to the priest, that is, to the Lord, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the Lord, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty."

Notice that according to the sacrificial system laid out for us in the book of Leviticus, if you sin you are to do a grocery list of things in order to receive God's forgiveness. This is a works-based arrangement that shows that the Mosaic Covenant is a works-based covenant.

**Objection:** But wasn't there forgiveness in the Old Covenant,? How is forgiveness compatible with a Covenant of Works?

**Answer:** Was the saving work of Jesus Christ applied to David through the specific provisions of the Old Covenant? First, Romans 3:25 tells us God left "the sins committed beforehand unpunished" until "God presented Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement." Were sins forgiven in

the Old Covenant era? According to Romans 3:25 they were only passed over. The sacrificial system did serve a purpose in the Old Covenant. It spoke of the sinfulness of man, it reminded him of his sin annually, and his the primary place in Scripture where a particular doctrine is explained need for a perfect substitute. It also pointed to God's mercy. But it did not *convey* God's mercy. The sacrificial system did nothing more than point to God's saving mercy and grace, even for believers during the Old Covenant era. The author of Hebrews makes this point when he writes:

The law is 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...But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1, 4).

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to obtain true forgiveness from God now in the age of fulfillment just like it was impossible in the Old Covenant era.

**Objection:** If the Old Covenant is really a works-based covenant, why didn't God crush the Israelites the moment they disobeyed? Some might say that the mercy and compassion of God displayed for so many years to the rebellious Israelites is evidence that the Old Covenant is a gracious covenant.

**Answer:** When God offered the Israelites an opportunity to repent or gave them mercy for a period of time rather than what they deserved, He was not inconsistent with His strict Covenant of Works arrangement that He made with the Israelites. His offers of opportunity to repent and receive His free mercy were not part of the terms of the covenant. Here is an illustration that I hope will clarify my point: John makes a binding contract with Martin. This contract states that Martin is to pay John \$500 each month to live in his house. If Martin does not pay on time each month the contract stipulates that John will throw Martin out on his ear the day after the money is due. Martin, of course, does not get the money to John on time and John decides to allow Martin to live in the house for free for a month and he even buys Martin dinner once a week. Do John's actions change the nature of the

contract that John made with Martin? Absolutely not! John chose to be merciful. In the same way, when the Jews were breaking the covenant God made with them, God chose to be merciful over and over again. But the fact that God showed them mercy did not change the nature of the covenant any more than John's decision not to throw Martin out for delinquency on his rent changes the nature of that covenant.

**Objection:** In Deuteronomy chapter 7 Scripture says that God chose the people of Israel by grace. He set His love and affection on them purely out of His sovereign kindness and mercy. Unconditional election is a concept that reveals God's grace more than almost any other. Doesn't that tell us that the Old Covenant was a gracious covenant?

**Answer:** Let's look at the passage and then consider how we might think this through:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands (Deuteronomy 7:6-9).

It looks as if God chose the Old Covenant people out of his graciousness and this does not seem like the language describing God's relationship to a people who are about to enter into a works-based relationship with Him. But when we describe God's relationship to the Israelites as gracious, are we speaking of special saving grace? Remember, we are defining grace as "God's (spiritual saving) favor given as a free gift by God to people who deserve His wrath." Did God set his saving love on all of these people? Did God choose Israel the nation in the same sense he chose believers before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4)? God, in this text, seems to be addressing the whole nation. Were they all believers and therefore eternally loved by God? Or were most of these people what theologians categorize as "historically elect," chosen to play a special part in God's plan of redemption, but

not heaven bound believers? The fact is, the vast majority of Israelites throughout history were physically redeemed but not spiritually redeemed. Certainly these people did not deserve the amazing favor God bestowed on them by giving them the Mosaic Covenant, which gives the gospel in types and shadows. No one else in the world had even a glimpse of the Gospel in picture form that the Israelites lived with on a daily basis. Paul, in the book of Romans, speaks to this issue. After he dresses down the Jews for thinking that they were saved simply because they were Jews and for thinking that they obeyed the law of Moses, Paul writes: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2). They deserved nothing but hell and God gave them, instead of all the other peoples in the world, the very words of God. Grace, grace, and more grace—but not saving grace.

**Objection:** Why would God give His chosen people a works based covenant that would not save them?

**Answer:** One of the patron saints of reformed theology, Louis Berkhof, asks this same question:

If the Sinaitic covenant was indeed a Covenant of Works, in which legal obedience was the way of salvation, then it certainly was a curse for Israel, for it was imposed on a people that could not possibly obtain salvation by works. But his covenant is represented in Scripture as a blessing bestowed upon Israel by a loving Father. (Ex. 19:5; Lev. 26:44,45; Deut. 4:8; Ps. 148:20).<sup>14</sup>

The basic purpose of the Old Covenant is clear in Scripture. It was given, in addition to the imputation of Adam’s sin, so that people might become more guilty: “The law was added so that the trespass might increase” (Romans 5:20a). The Old Covenant (law) was given after the Abrahamic Covenant (promise) for the very same reason: “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (Galatians 3:19). The purpose was to make a guilty people even guiltier. The Old Covenant served as a great historical illustration of the hopelessness of obtaining salvation by obedience to law because sinners like you and me only

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<sup>14</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 297-298.

increase our guilt. So the Old Covenant is certainly a blessing for us in that it teaches us our need for Christ: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

That is great news for us who live in the New Covenant era, but how did the Old Covenant function as a blessing for the Israelites if it was a Covenant of Works that condemned them? The Apostle Paul answers this question in two main places in his letters. First, in Romans 3 he writes: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2).

Unlike the rest of the world, God spoke to the Jews. Although it wasn't salvation, it certainly was an advantage. He gave them the gospel in picture form. They should have learned that they needed a savior from all that God did reveal to them. They should have learned that the Old Covenant only increased their sin. Their advantage was that God spoke to them and they had the opportunity to learn about God. Paul makes a similar point, but in a slightly different context, in his letter to the Ephesians:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13).

The Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world while the Jews had the Word of God. Only the Jews out of all people in the whole world had any special revelation from the God of heaven and earth. Can you imagine what an incredible privilege that was? The Jews were near to God and the Gentiles were far from him. The Jews still needed and still need salvation, just as the Gentiles need it: “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:17-18).

Even though the blessing the Jews received from having the Word of God was not salvation, the Jews clearly had the advantage because God had spoken to them and shown them who He was (and is). Therefore

they had the opportunity to know the way of salvation, much like children of believing parents as opposed to children of unbelieving parents.

So the Old Covenant was *both* a works-based covenant with the purpose of increasing the sin of the Israelites *and* the Word of God that gave Jews a decided advantage over the rest of the world. The Old Covenant is a blessing to us because it teaches us the futility of trying to earn our salvation by obedience to the law, and it was a blessing to the Israelites because in it God revealed Himself to Israel.



## Chapter 5

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### Was True Forgiveness Part Of The Old Covenant?

This is an important question. New Covenant Theologians say that the Old Covenant was only a picture of true spiritual salvation and that it could not acquire forgiveness of sins for those under it. In Leviticus 16 Aaron makes atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people of Israel. Aaron is able, after this atonement made on his own behalf, to enter the holy of holies—the presence of God. In many places in Leviticus it is said that once the priest makes atonement for someone, that person’s sin is forgiven (4:22-26, 4:31, 35, 6:7, 19:22). At first glance, it seems that true forgiveness of sins was part of the Old Covenant. Consequently, we need to have a “theology of the second glance” and consider what the Scriptures have to say about this matter.

This question forces us to address straightforward Old Testament texts to see how we should read them on this side of the cross of Christ. The words “atonement” and “forgiven” are repeated many times. If you were simply to read the Old Testament accounts without considering the New Testament teachings, you would certainly come to the conclusion that true spiritual atonement and divine forgiveness were acquired by that priestly work. Let’s look at some of these Old Covenant passages:

He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way **he will make atonement** for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. No one is to be in the Tent of Meeting from the

time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel (Leviticus 16:15-17).

Aaron is told to make atonement. He is giving a sacrifice of bull's blood to turn God's wrath away from the Israelites because of their transgressions of God's covenant law. This was God's stated plan for dealing with the sin of the Israelites. Consider the following text from the book of Leviticus that tells us that the sacrifice of these animals in the proper manner actually procures God's forgiveness:

When a leader sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the commands of the LORD his God, he is guilty. When he is made aware of the sin he committed, he must bring as his offering a male goat without defect. He is to lay his hand on the goat's head and slaughter it at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered before the LORD. It is a sin offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. He shall burn all the fat on the altar as he burned the fat of the fellowship offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for the man's sin, and **he will be forgiven** (Leviticus 4:22-26).

If we did Hebrew word studies on atonement and forgiveness we would find nothing new. These words refer to the satisfaction of God's wrath. In the next two passages consider the range of sin for which God says these sacrifices satisfy His wrath:

The LORD said to Moses: "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the LORD **by deceiving his neighbor** about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or **if he cheats him**, or **if he finds lost property and lies about it**, or **if he swears falsely**, or if he commits any such sin that people may do—when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering. And as a penalty he must bring to the priest, that is, to the LORD, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty" (Leviticus 6:1-7).

**If a man sleeps with a woman who is a slave girl promised to another man** but who has not been ransomed or given her freedom, there must be due

punishment. Yet they are not to be put to death, because she had not been freed. The man, however, must bring a ram to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting for a guilt offering to the LORD. With the ram of the guilt offering the priest is to make atonement for him before the LORD for the sin he has committed, and his sin will be forgiven (Leviticus 19:20-22).

Whether it is lying, cheating, stealing, fornication, or garden-variety rebellion, God's solution for the Israelites was for the sinner to run to the priest and have a bull, ram, or goat sacrificed to pay for the sin. If a sinner was faithful to do this, then he would be forgiven by God and he would no longer be guilty of his sin. These texts could not be any clearer as to the purpose and apparent effectiveness of the animal sacrifices.

Now we need to consider what the New Testament says about these sacrifices. The following text compares the animal sacrifices in the Old Covenant era and the one sacrifice of Christ:

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! (Hebrews 9:12-14)

The blood of Christ does more than the blood of bulls and goats. The animal sacrifices only made the Old Covenant sinner "outwardly clean" while the New Covenant sacrifice of Christ cleanses our consciences and enables us to serve God. However, without the book of Hebrews, I would never have known that the animal sacrifices commanded in Leviticus only made one "outwardly clean." There is an even stronger word about those sacrifices in the next passage:

The law is 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. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4).

Clearly this passage says that the blood of bulls and goats was never able to take away sins. No matter how many animal sacrifices were done; no matter how perfectly the priest followed God's instructions; and no matter what is said in the Law of Moses about these sacrifices, they could do nothing to take away God's wrath and reconcile sinners to God. All that they could do was remind the Israelites that they were sinners in need of God's forgiveness.

This is astounding! It seems like there is a contradiction in Scripture. But this is perhaps the most basic fact in Scripture—God's wrath cannot be appeased by animal sacrifices. His wrath could only be appeased by the death of the perfect God-man, who God Himself had to provide. No weak sinful priest could offer this perfect sacrifice, so God made His only Son not only the sacrificial lamb, but the priest as well! How could such a basic fact in Scripture be knotted with this apparent contradiction? God is the Divine author of the Old and New Testaments. They fit together perfectly. But in order to come to this conclusion you must grasp the picture/fulfillment relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The animal sacrifices were simply pictures or shadows of the one true sacrifice of Christ. The Old Covenant priesthood was simply a picture or shadow of the one true priest who would live forever and actually accomplish redemption for His people. The examples of Old Covenant types and their New Covenant anti-types could be multiplied.

So then, you might ask, "How could God allow a guilty and sinful priest into His presence in the holy of holies?" We must remember that God is omnipresent. We are always standing before Him no matter where we are. The holy of holies was a special place that God set up to illustrate His holiness, but God could choose to allow a sinner into that room without striking Him dead as easily as he daily chooses to allow unbelievers to walk on His earth and breathe His air without striking them dead. The author of the book of Hebrews tells us that the whole purpose of the tabernacle was to illustrate a truth: Guilty sinners cannot approach a holy God. The priest had to go through the motions of atoning for sin before walking into the holy of holies because God wanted to illustrate that we cannot live with Him while we are still guilty of our sin:

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 golden altar of incense and 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, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. 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, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order** (Hebrews 9:1-10).

The real question isn't how the high priest actually could enter the Most Holy Place. The real question is why *only* the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. If the sacrifices actually did anything, the Israelites would have been innocent before God and they could have gone into that sanctuary and spoken with Him freely. But they could not enter. God *built this inconsistency into the system* to show us that the sacrifices never really atoned for sin.

The problem still remains that God said that the animal sacrifices actually atoned for sin when they did not. Was God lying? No. This dilemma is resolved by correctly understanding how Scripture fits together and the purpose of different portions of Scripture. The purpose of the Old Covenant was not to save sinners. Rather, it was to point forward to the work of Christ that was to come. The purpose of the work of Christ, which is to save sinners, is what the New Covenant is all about. Just as the purpose of the physical tabernacle was to illustrate "that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper" (Hebrews 9:9), the purpose of the sacrificial system was to illustrate our need for forgiveness of sins. Consequently, God could say that the animal sacrifices actually atoned for sin when they did not because He wanted to teach us spiritual truth through this Old Covenant picture.

The purpose of the Old Covenant and God's dealings with Old Covenant Israel was not for the salvation of the Israelites of that time. The pictures of forgiveness of sins through sacrifice, the examples of

disobedience and apostasy, and even the great deliverance or redemption of the Israelites out of physical bondage were not for their salvation but for ours. It was not for their spiritual benefit but for our spiritual benefit: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). God orchestrated the birth and multiplication of the Israelites; He delivered them from the Egyptians; He had them rebel and die in their sins in the wilderness; and He placed them under the Old Covenant for 1500 years. God did all of this to teach us, not to save them. One of God’s primary purposes in orchestrating the history of Israel as He did was for us to learn from it and have a richer understanding of the seriousness of our sin and the glory of our redemption. This is not so different from Romans 9 where Paul tells us about God’s purpose in creating people who were predestined to experience His eternal wrath:

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:21-24)

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SECTION **2**

*Questions  
About*

**ISRAEL**



## Chapter 6

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### How Does New Covenant Theology View Israel?

There are certain areas of theology that in the current evangelical climate might be considered “sacred cows.” To disagree with mainstream opinion on these particular points of theology is like criticizing mom and apple pie. It’s just not done! One of those sacred areas of theology is the place of the people of Israel in God’s plan, both historically and in the future. Correctly understanding how Israel fits into God’s plan is actually crucial to correctly understanding Scripture as a whole. It is simply too important a topic for us to consider taboo. So it is time for us to make some hamburger out of those “sacred cows,” to have some “apple pie” for dessert, and to sit “mom” down and tell her the error of her ways.

How shall we think about Israel? The most popular view is that of Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism teaches that the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the chosen people of God. They have always been the “apple of God’s eye” and, although most of them reject the Gospel now, there will be a time in the future when God will bring the nation *en masse* to faith in Christ. One might summarize the mainstream dispensational view this way: Israel is the first people of God and they have an even more legitimate claim to God’s saving love than does the church, which is people of God number two. Dispensationalism looks back into the Old Covenant era and sees Israel as a mostly saved people of God who were struggling with sin. When they look forward in time they see Israel as an entirely saved people restored to their land and enjoying God’s blessing as a national entity. Regardless of the stripe of Dispensationalism, to one degree or another this system of theology views Israel as a mostly believing people

who will experience an outpouring of God's temporal and saving grace as an ethnically distinct people.

The second most popular view concerning Israel is that of Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology looks at Israel as the church in the Old Testament. This system of theology sees continuity between Israel and the church in that they are both part of the one people of God. Israel was a "mixed multitude" of believers and unbelievers, just as the church today is a "mixed multitude" of believers and unbelievers. Covenant Theology views the people of God in the Old Testament being widened in the New Covenant era to include Gentiles as well. It also sees the future for Israel that is predicted in the Old Testament as being fulfilled in the church today.<sup>15</sup>

Then there is the view of NCT, which understands Israel to be an unbelieving type or picture of the true people of God, the church. According to NCT, Israel never was a believing people as a whole. Israel always had a tiny remnant of true believers in her midst. Israel was not the church in the Old Testament, but they did function as a type or picture of the church—the true people of God.

### **The Exodus Generation: Loved, Chosen, Redeemed, and Cursed?**

Israel was born as an independent nation when God delivered them out of Egypt and out of Pharaoh's evil hands. God "redeemed" the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and He set His love upon this peculiar people:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

If you read the verses quoted above without knowledge of the rest of the Old Testament, you might begin to believe that God chose the Old Covenant people to have eternal life, just as He saves Christians today.

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<sup>15</sup> Although some Covenant Theologians understand Scripture to teach a future large ingathering of Jews to true faith in Christ, they understand that these Israelite converts will immediately become part of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles.

These verses certainly describe a God who is being “gracious” to a people who do not deserve His favor. But when we describe God’s relationship to the Israelites as gracious, are we speaking of *special saving grace*? Did God set his *saving love* on the people of Israel? Did God *choose* Israel the nation in the same sense he *chose* believers before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Ephesians 1:3-4)? God, in the passage quoted above, is addressing the whole nation of Israel. Were all or most of the Israelites recipients of God’s eternal saving love? These are the questions before us.

God poured out His love on the people of Israel in a way that He did not do for the other nations around Israel. He loved them by giving them this covenant, which contains the gospel in picture form. Paul, in the book of Romans, addresses this issue: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2). They deserved nothing but hell and God gave to them the very words of God. During the Old Covenant era, if you were not an Israelite there was no chance for you to even see the shadows of the gospel that God provided for Israel. Paul writes about the situation of the non-Israelite in the Old Covenant era in Ephesians 2:12 “...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” So God certainly did show the Israelites amazing love. But, I hope to show you that God did not have eternal saving love for most Israelites in the Old Covenant era.

After delivering the Israelites out of the hands of Pharaoh, God made certain that they did not enter the Promised Land of Canaan because of their rebellion. He made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all of them died without entering the land except for Joshua and Caleb. The proof that the entire generation of Israelites were not believers is that they did not enter the Promised Land. The book of Hebrews addresses this issue by using that generation of Israelites as an example to warn believers who seem to be turning away from Christ due to hard times:

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “ Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their

hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest” (Hebrews 3:7-11).

The *loved, chosen* and *redeemed* Israelites were not allowed to enter the land, which God referred to as His rest.

Just because the Israelites did not enter the physical land, it does not mean that they were unbelievers—or does it? William Lane, in his commentary on the book of Hebrews, writes the following concerning this passage: “His (the author of Hebrews) concern is that the community should maintain its integrity and continue to live in terms of the divine promises. The memory of Israel’s failure in this regard, as set forth in Ps 95, provides the basis for the sober warning that a refusal to listen to God’s voice and to respond in obedience would entail the tragic loss of their promised inheritance.”<sup>16</sup> The loss of inheritance is the loss of the promised land. But we see very clearly in the book of Hebrews that entering the land was simply a physical picture of entering salvation or believing and resting from reliance on works to earn God’s favor. What is revealed to us in the Old Testament is a people unwilling to trust and obey God resulting in a loss of a physical inheritance. This is then interpreted by the Holy Spirit through the author of the book of Hebrews as a warning for people refusing to trust in the work of Jesus Christ alone to save them. The warning is that if they continue in unbelief *as did the Exodus generation*, they too will lose their inheritance and they will receive spiritual condemnation. The Exodus generation becomes the infamous example of unbelief. The author of Hebrews writes about this:

As has just been said: “Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, **because of their unbelief** (Hebrews 3:15-19).

The message of these verses can be paraphrased as follows: “The Israelites of the wilderness generation turned from God and experienced

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<sup>16</sup> William. L. Lane, “Hebrews 1-8,” in *Word Biblical Commentary 47a* (Waco, Texas: Word books, 1991), 83.

His judgment. They were a disobedient people who lost their inheritance because they were unbelievers. Don't be like them!"

The wilderness generation, who had the blood of Abraham coursing through their veins, was a generation of unbelievers. They heard the "good news" and did not believe. Therefore they received God's judgment. This judgment is illustrated to us by their physical death before entering Canaan. According to the inspired interpretation of the Old Testament by the author of the book of Hebrews, the *chosen, loved* and *redeemed* people of Israel in the Exodus generation were unbelieving and died in their unbelief. This is only the first step in our journey in understanding the biblical identity of the nation of Israel. Perhaps Israel learned her lessons and turned to God in true repentance and faith leading to a bright and godly future. It is to this possibility that we will now turn our attention.

### **Joshua: Turning Over A New Leaf?**

The book of Joshua is really the conclusion to the Pentateuch. When you finish the book of Deuteronomy you are left wondering what will happen in the Promised Land. Will this next generation of Israelites obey God and inherit the land? If all we had were the first five books of the Bible it would be like reading a gripping novel and finding the last chapter missing! In the book of Joshua, God has a brand new people to start over with after the horrible rebellion that brought God's judgment just a generation before. We also find that Israel has a brand new leader under whom the new people are finally going to enter the Promised Land. The future looks bright. In order to make things clear that the Israelites are starting over, Joshua records the Israelites telling him, "Whatever you have commanded we will do" (1:16). This is just what their forefathers said to Moses in Exodus 24:7 before their rebelliousness flared up. In the first few chapters of the book of Joshua, the Israelites are obedient and seem to have turned over a new leaf. Although there are moments of disobedience that punctuate the account of Israel in Joshua, on the whole it was a positive account of God's people being brought into the Promised Land and possessing it.

If being kept from entering the physical land for the Exodus generation was a sign of their unbelief, it would make sense to think that those who entered and possessed the Promised Land under Joshua were actually believers, right? In fact, we read that the Abrahamic Promise of people and land was actually fulfilled in the book of Joshua:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

If we just read the Old Testament, it would seem that, at the time of Joshua, Israel was a believing nation. But again, when the author of the book of Hebrews looks back at the rest in the land that the Israelites were given, he writes that they did not receive salvation:

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:8-11).

The fact that God kept the Exodus generation from entering into the land and the fact that He made them die in the desert should be seen as clear evidence of Israel's unbelief according to God's own interpretation of those events in the book of Hebrews. So how does the author of the book of Hebrews interpret the scenario in which Israel does enter the land under Joshua's leadership? Well, we see that the "rest" that they were given in the land was not spiritual salvation but merely physical salvation.

It is possible that there was a higher percentage of believers than unbelievers in the generation under the leadership of Joshua. But even if that were the case, it would not affect the larger argument. You see, in addition to the fact that the New Testament tells us that the Israelites under Joshua did not receive true salvation rest, we will find that God's evaluative statement of the spiritual state of Israel is that they were an unbelieving people from the Exodus through the fall of Judah (1 Kings 21:14-15). So, even if there was a significant number of believers in the time of Joshua, and there certainly could have been,<sup>17</sup> it does not seem to matter to God when He looks at the history of Israel as a whole.

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<sup>17</sup> Joshua 24:31 "Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel."

### Judges: Living Like Hell In The Promised Land

The people of Israel made a good start at living in obedience to God according to the end of the book of Joshua. The book of Judges gives us a glimpse at the nation of Israel after they began to possess the land. In the book of Joshua, the Israelites made some big promises to God and to Joshua:

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God."

Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."

But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD."

"Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.

"Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."

And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him" (Joshua 24:14-24).

In the period of the Judges, did the Israelites live up to the promises they made to God and to Joshua in Shechem? Not exactly. The constant refrain of the book of Judges is, "then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Judges 2:11, 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1, 10:6; 13:1). Imagine your weakest moment when you are most vulnerable to temptation. Are you tempted to stop at the local Mosque or Buddhist temple to worship another god? The Israelites actually physically bowed down to pagan gods and perhaps participated in human sacrifice in the process of their "worship":

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They **followed** and **worshiped** various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths (Judges 2:11-13).

Let's look at another sin the Israelites were involved in: "The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods" (Judges 3:5-6). Blatant idolatry and intermarrying with God's enemies were the two big and consistent sins that plagued the Israelites. These sins characterized the lives of the Israelites. It is not only the type of sin Israel was committing, but it is also the pattern of sin that marked the nation that is so disturbing. This sort of sin was being committed by the nation as a whole, punctuated only by brief periods of repentance, and it went on for a period of about 300 years! The history of the nation of Israel during the period of time recorded in the book of Judges is a history that causes the reader to ask the question, "How can a holy God who demands loyalty and faithfulness put up with the evil and rebellion of the nation of Israel?" The answer comes in the unfolding of the history of God's judgment on Israel that is revealed in the rest of the Old Testament.

### **Israel, Judah, and the Curse of the Old Covenant**

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings record the golden age of Israel and the judgment God poured out on her resulting in the destruction of the nation. In rejecting the prophet and last Judge, Samuel, the people rejected God Himself: "And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you" (1 Samuel 8:7-8). Although that doesn't sound like a good report about Israel, a golden age was about to begin. The nation experienced unprecedented prosperity after David became king. But it did not last. Solomon ran after power, wealth, and women setting Israel on a course that ultimately resulted in her well-deserved divine judgment.

As we examine the history of this period and God's own evaluation of Israel, we find that Israel is once again lacking the qualities of God's true chosen people. God promises David an everlasting dynastic kingdom (2 Samuel 7:6-16). We see the beginning of a fulfillment of this promise as we enter the golden age for Israel. The borders expand under David and under Solomon in his early years. In short, we see economic prosperity and geographical expansion for Israel. But as history moves on we see the people of Israel engaging more and more in idolatry and immorality. After the kingdom of Israel divides into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, God first pours out His wrath on Israel by exiling them from the Promised Land using the Assyrians (722 B.C.) as His chosen instrument of judgment. Then Judah is next to experience the wrath of God for their rebellion. He sends in the Babylonians to clean house in 586 B.C. God ends the book of 2 Kings with His divine interpretation of the spiritual state of the Israelites. He makes it clear that the exile was not simply His fatherly and loving hand of discipline on His children. Rather it was His wrath against unbelievers:

The Lord said through his servants the prophets: "Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch out over Jerusalem the measuring line used against Samaria and the plumb line used against the house of Ahab. I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance and hand them over to their enemies. They will be looted and plundered by all their foes, because **they have done evil in my eyes and have provoked me to anger from the day their forefathers came out of Egypt until this day** (2 Kings 21:10-15).

Here we have a clear biblical statement of God's own evaluation of the nation of Israel from the time of her birth until the time of the exile of Judah. They had always been a wicked and unbelieving people. There seems to be no room to call them a believing nation. They were always a people who could be characterized as having done evil in God's eyes. We are not left to our own imaginations to interpret exactly what God was saying to the Israelites when he punished them. God interpreted his work in the history of Israel for us.

Now if you know your Old Testament history, you know that the exile was an historic low-point for the nation of Israel. But there was a period of restoration that followed that is recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The physical descendants of Abraham began to return from exile and rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the holy temple. It is to this restoration period that we will now turn our attention.

### **The Restoration Period**

Perhaps the time of Ezra and Nehemiah were the days in which the people truly did turn to God and become a nation of believers. After all, they were back in the land and God had clearly intervened on their behalf so that they could rebuild the walls and the temple and settle there. The Scriptures were being publicly read and the people were attentive and even weeping over their sin. Yet, even after all of the attempts at reform, we find Nehemiah literally beating people for their rebelliousness:

Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned?" (Nehemiah 13:23-26).

The restoration is clearly a high point in Israel's history. That is why it is illuminating that the sins of intermarrying with pagans and worshiping their gods still characterized the Israelites. In fact, the sins that characterize the restoration period are mixed marriages (Malachi 2:11-15), failure to tithe (Malachi 3:8-10, Nehemiah 13:10-14), no concern for the Lord's Sabbath (Malachi 2:8-9, 4:4; Nehemiah 13:15-22), corrupt priests (Malachi 1:6-2:9, Nehemiah 13:7-9), and general wickedness (Malachi 3:5, Nehemiah 5:1-13). When we turn to the last of the Old Testament prophets we find not only all of these same sins being rebuked, but we also find a final evaluation of the spiritual condition of the Israelites even during the restoration period: "Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my

decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 3:7).

It seems that the Israelites are once again given a sweeping evaluation of being unbelieving. They are characterized, from their birth as a people, until the last word of the final Old Covenant prophet, as being a disobedient people. The Apostle John makes it very clear that we are to understand those who are characterized by disobedience to God as unbelievers: "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Our next stop on this tour of Israel's spiritual condition is the New Testament.

### **The Gospels and the Book of Acts**

Beginning with the Gospels we find a New Testament pattern in which Jesus and the Apostles go first to the Jews, who reject the gospel, and then to the Gentiles. In the introduction of the Gospel of John this pattern is clearly revealed: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:11-13). The constant emphasis in the New Testament is that although the Israelites were born into the people of God by "blood" or physical descent, they are not part of God's true people. There is a reconstitution of the people of God moving from physical descent, or those related to Abraham by blood, to spiritual descent, or those possessing the faith of Abraham irrespective of their ancestry.

In Matthew chapter 8, when Jesus is talking to a Roman centurion, the soldier expresses his trust that Jesus has the authority to simply speak and it will be done. That is, he expressed his conviction that Jesus was God Himself. Jesus goes on to compare the faith of this Gentile to the unfaithfulness of Israel:

When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:10-12).

The “sons of the kingdom” are the nation of Israel and they are to be “cast out into the outer darkness” into eternal punishment in hell (Matthew 22:13) which is where all unbelievers spend eternity. D.A. Carson writes concerning this passage:

So the ‘subjects of the kingdom’ are the Jews, who see themselves as sons of Abraham..., belonging to the kingdom by right...But Jesus reverses roles (cf. 21:43); and the sons of the kingdom are thrown aside, left out of the future messianic banquet, consigned to darkness where there are tears and gnashing of teeth- elements common to descriptions of gehenna, hell.<sup>18</sup>

Matthew makes it clear that the majority of Israelites are going to face God’s eternal judgment because they have rejected Him. In Matthew 8, quoted above, Jesus states that the Israelites would be replaced by a people who actually love God. Later in Matthew’s Gospel, we find an even more shocking indictment of Israel:

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’ “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but

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<sup>18</sup>D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 8 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984), 202-203.

they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet (Matthew 21:33-45).

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Israel. In Scripture, when the leaders are indicted, the followers are necessarily included in that indictment. This parable is in keeping with the consistent theme throughout the Gospels: Israel is being rejected as a people of God. Notice, this parable is speaking of the entire history of Israel. It says “they killed his servants.” “His servants” can only be identified as the prophets that God sent to Israel throughout the Old Covenant era:

So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!... O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate (Matthew 23:31-32, 37-38).

So, the parable of the tenants really tells us that God views Israel throughout history as a rebellious and unbelieving nation. Israel culminated her rebellion by instigating the crucifixion of the Son of God. Jesus *seemed to be* turning His back on them as a people and taking away even the offer of salvation. The Apostle Paul’s reaction to the Jews is strikingly similar to Jesus’ rejection of this rebellious people. Let’s turn our attention to the Apostle Paul and his attitude toward Israel in the book of Acts.

In Acts 13 we find Paul speaking to Jews in Psidian Antioch, where he is getting abused as usual:

On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, **we now turn to the Gentiles**” (Acts 13:44-46).

In the book of Acts we see Paul first going to the synagogues, or those places where Jews gathered. But they were so consistent in their rejection of the Gospel and their abuse of Paul that he gradually turned from even striving to evangelize them. We find Paul in a similar situation in Corinth a few chapters later:

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized (Acts 18:5-8).

Paul is clearly following in the footsteps of the Lord by turning away from the physical people of God and going to the Gentiles with the gospel.

Luke ends the book of Acts by recording an incident in which Paul was speaking to Jewish leaders about his rejection of Israel and his decision to turn his evangelistic efforts toward the nations. In the midst of this he quotes Isaiah 6 and God's decree that the Israelites would remain spiritually blind:

They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: "'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (Acts 28:23-28)

The clear pattern and message in the Gospels and Acts is that the long awaited salvation has finally come. The Jews have rejected God and rebelled against Him for the last time. God is turning from the Jews to the Gentiles. Israel has not only been an unbelieving people throughout history, but it seems as if God has completely rejected them and they have no hope. It is not until you read Paul's argument for Israel in Romans 11 that you find any hope left for Israel.

### Conclusion

I believe that the evidence from Scripture that Israel has always been an unbelieving people is overwhelming. In each significant historical epoch their behavior is characterized by disobedience. In addition, God's evaluative statements about Israel's spiritual condition stretch throughout redemptive history and are always negative.

### Answering Objections

**Objection:**<sup>19</sup> This chapter neglected to mention that God didn't kick the Israelites out of the land, as Deuteronomy warned (Deuteronomy 28:63). He didn't make them perish in the desert, as He did the wilderness generation. Thus, Israel isn't the unbelieving people of God, they are the people of God struggling with sin. Parallels are not difficult to find in the Christian life. Paul warns against greed, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). It is Christians who are warned to flee from idolatry (1Corinthians 10:14; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1John 5:21). Paul exhorted Christians that they were to marry in the Lord (1Corinthians 7:39). The sad fact of the matter is that Christians struggle with greed and other forms of idolatry, and they often marry non-Christians. This does not make them unbelievers.

**Answer:** This is an objection I have heard time and again from those who hold to Covenant Theology. But let's stop and consider this for a moment. Simply because God did not bring His crushing judgment on the Israelites for many years, must we conclude that they were a nation of believers until that time? We do not conclude the same thing today with people who are characterized by sin but have not received the fullness of God's judgment. The thinking behind this objection can actually lead to a watering down of what it means to be a believer. Because Covenant Theology considers Israel the church in the Old Testament, Covenant Theologians have a tendency to expect the church and the Christian life in the New Covenant era to look like the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era. This view of Israel and the church brings the Dispensational doctrine of the "carnal Christian" in through the back door.

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<sup>19</sup> These objections were either paraphrased or taken word for word from an article by Greg Welty which you can find at:  
<http://www.ccir.ed.ac.uk/~jad/welty/lehrer.htm>

Let's put Israel's sin into clearer focus by putting their behavior into a contemporary setting. What would you think if I married an unbeliever, went down to the local mosque and worshiped Allah for several years, and raised my children to do the same? Would you think that I was simply a believer struggling with sin? Of course not! I would hope that you would have a settled mind about the fact that I do not know Jesus and that I need the gospel. It is not only the types of sins the nation committed, but the lack of true repentance that we see. If you give the book of Judges a careful reading, I believe you will find that the nation of Israel during this period was never a truly repentant people. God periodically made life so miserable for them that they would cry out for deliverance. But soon after they were delivered they returned to their wickedness.

It is true that we are warned to stay away from sin in the New Covenant Scriptures. It is also true that Christians fall into sin. But the difference between what was happening in the book of Judges and the experience of the Christian struggling with sin is like the difference between night and day. I think it is obvious and really doesn't need explanation so much as it simply needs to be considered and reflected upon. When I have the opportunity to drive through a really nice neighborhood, sometimes I see the houses, cars, and even women that are so beautiful and I start to lust after them. This is clearly a serious sin and I dare not take it lightly. I have committed idolatry in various ways when I sin in this fashion. I must repent, and this sin must not characterize my life. But this seems different than actually consciously going out and worshiping another God, participating in immorality as a form of this worship, marrying into a people who do this, and having children and raising them to worship this false god in this wicked fashion.

**Objection:** Stop for a moment and consider the examples of believers in the Old Testament. Consider Gideon, who repeatedly tested the Lord (Judges 6:17, 36-40), was too afraid to oppose idolatry publicly (Judges 6:27), meted out harsh, torturous punishment on his own countrymen (Judges 8:7), and actually promoted idolatry in his hometown (Judges 8:27). Consider Barak, who wouldn't fight unless a woman was at his side (Judges 4:8). Consider Samson, who lusted after and demanded a Philistine as his wife (Judges 14:1-3), violated his Nazirite vow (Judges 14:8-9), consorted with prostitutes (Judges 16:1), and caused the Lord

to leave him through his own disobedience (Judges 16:20). Consider Jephthah, who made a rash vow of human sacrifice (like the Ammonites around him, Judges 11:30-31), and actually fulfilled that vow, devoting to destruction not just the enemies of the Lord but his own daughter as well (v. 39). If we evaluate the lives of these men according to your standards, they would be idolatrous unbelievers. But the book of Hebrews sets forth Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, by name, as examples of Christian faith that the Hebrew Christians were to emulate in a time of trial (Hebrews 11:32-40). Perfectionism in evaluating the lives of both Christians and Israelites should be avoided.

**Answer:** Those are some good points. Let me respond in two parts. First, Hebrews 11 never refers to the nation of Israel as a whole. The author of Hebrews picks out a handful of specific individuals and recognizes them or their specific actions as examples of faith. In this article I am referring to Israel as a whole over several generations. My argument is *not* that there were never any believers in Israel during the Old Covenant era. My argument *is* that Israel is always characterized as an unbelieving people as a whole. There was always a remnant of believers within Israel. But the emphasis in Scripture is on the consistent unbelief of the vast majority of Israelites throughout biblical history. Also, just because a person is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as exercising faith does not necessarily mean that he was a believer. Look at Hebrews 11:29, “By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.” We might be tempted to conclude that the Israelites were believers and the Egyptians were unbelievers, but, as I argued in my article, the Exodus generation is seen in Scripture as unbelieving as a whole.

Second, to level the charge of perfectionism is to radically misunderstand my point. *I am not* saying that certain Israelites sinned and therefore they cannot be believers. But *I am* saying that every person who Jesus purchased on the cross will have a life that is characterized by love of God rather than love of sin. Jesus purchased a work of the Spirit guaranteeing this for all of His people. It is true that believers commit the worst of sins and are restored. David committed adultery and murder. But David was obviously a believer. How do I know this? Because we are told in Scripture that he was a believer (Romans 4:4-8), he was clearly repentant (Psalm 32 and 51), and his life was not *characterized* by those awful sins.

**Objection:** You note that God eventually poured out His wrath upon His people by exiling them, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. But the very fact that God waited that long until he brought the covenant curses upon His people proves that Israel was qualitatively different at this stage than they were at previous stages. God was faithful to bring his covenant curses upon the people when they were required. He would have been unfaithful to bring them earlier, and unfaithful not to bring them when He did.

**Answer:** I would rather say that God was merciful and that Israel got progressively worse as time marched on. In the same way, God was patient with Sodom and Gomorrah. But are we to gather that the Sodomites must have been believers until God finally lowered the boom? Of course not. Their sin simply had to reach a point at which God would be most glorified in showing His wrath to the world. God shows the same patience in judgment with the wicked Amorites. In Genesis 15:16 He tells Abram that it will be four generations before He brings the Israelites in to judge the Amorites. The reason is not that they were believers but that their sin had “not yet reached its full measure.”

**Objection:** To be sure, according to 2 Kings 21:10-15, the Israelites had done evil in God’s eyes (so do Christians) and had provoked Him to anger/displeasure (so do Christians, who can grieve the Spirit, Ephesians 4:30, and bring His disciplining chastisement, rebuke, and punishment, Hebrews 12:5-6). But the point is that they weren’t apostate until God brought His final judgment on them in 722 and 586 B.C. Indeed, the reference to God’s chastisement in Hebrews 12:5-6 is instructive, for there the writer is merely citing Proverbs 3:11-12, thus explicitly linking the Lord’s chastisement received by His people under the Old Covenant, with what Christians can expect under the New.

**Answer:** Notice that the assumption in the objection is that Israel (as a whole) is continuous with the church, and that the Israelites in the Old Covenant era were just like most or all Christians are today. It is like saying that Christians always do evil in God’s sight and that He burns with anger against us quite often. Is that really an accurate picture of Christians in the New Covenant era? Did the Israelites simply get God’s fatherly discipline like Christians are said to receive out of love in

Hebrews 12? Or is it comparing apples and oranges here to compare the judgment God visits on Israel and the loving discipline He gives to His true children? The above objection would seem to imply that God punishes His eternally forgiven children and that Christians do not get new hearts. This objection seems to miss the blood-bought work of the Spirit in the life of the believer that causes him to love God more than sin.

The evaluation in 2 Kings 21:10-15 is the reasoning behind why God is going to curse (not chasten or discipline) Israel by turning them over to the Babylonians. Notice that those verses do not say, “you used to be somewhat bad but now you have really hit rock bottom.” They would have to if the statement above, “they weren’t apostate until God brought his final judgment on them in 711 and 586 B.C” were valid. Instead, the passage says that Israel had always been the same—a bunch of evil-doers. God simply chose that particular time to visit his wrathful judgment on them. I think 2 Kings 21:14-15 speaks directly to the objection by saying that Israel as a whole has always been unbelieving.

**Objection:** You refer to the days of Ezra and Nehemiah as a period in which the Israelites were unbelieving. But the fact that they were brought back to the land proves that they had truly repented and returned to the Lord with all their heart and soul, for that was the condition of the promise, which brought them back (Deuteronomy 30:1-6). Also, Nehemiah 13:23-27 is only a reference to some of the men of Judah who intermarried. And even here, that is not evidence that they must have been unbelievers, unless we want to conclude that any Christian who marries an unbeliever is *ipso facto* an unbeliever.

**Answer:** Returning to the land does not prove repentance and faith. The people in Joshua’s day possessed the land, and as I stated earlier, they did not receive their salvation rest according to Hebrews 4:8-11. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 says that restoration to the land will be at a time when Israel gets circumcised hearts. But that is not at all the picture we get from the history recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuke in Malachi. It is better to understand Deuteronomy 30, which brings together restoration to the land and circumcision of the heart, as referring ultimately to the spiritual land and spiritual salvation which is again seen in Hebrews 4:8-11. And, of course, marrying an unbeliever does not make one *ipso facto* an unbeliever, but being characterized by

disobedience to the Lord as Israel was (Malachi 3:7) is the evidence that one is an unbeliever.

## *Chapter* **Chapter 7**

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### How Do You Handle Old Testament Promises About Land, Military Power, And Priests?

Sometimes the things that are said by the prophets about a future age seem incredible and hard to explain. These prophets speak about a time after God judges Israel for her transgressions, when God will restore the nation of Israel. When the prophets describe this period of restoration, they do so in detail that is both unimaginably wonderful and puzzling to us today. I think NCT gives a clear and consistent way of interpreting these wonderful promises. We understand that the Abrahamic Covenant was first fulfilled physically in the Old Covenant and in the nation of Israel and then fulfilled spiritually in the New Covenant and the church. In light of this, in the Old Covenant era we see spiritual truths being related in picture form. When God revealed man's need for atonement, He used the types and shadows of an elaborate sacrificial system including thousands of priests and barnyard animals. When God revealed the promise of His people to dwell with Him, He did so in the types and shadows of the land in the Middle East and in a building made of bricks and mortar. This is the way in which God revealed His plan in the Old Covenant era. So when God used the prophets to explain the spiritual fulfillment of God's plan in the New Covenant era, God decided to use the language of types and shadows. He was describing the New Covenant in the language of the Old Covenant. He pointed toward the spiritual goal of God's plan in the brightest and clearest way that the physical types and shadows would allow.

### Amos 9 and Acts 15

There is a prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 that is quoted in Acts 15:14-20 which will help us to understand how God interprets Old Testament prophecies concerning a future restoration of national Israel. Our first step in interpreting this prophecy in Amos is to determine its context within the Old Testament. Amos is prophesying against the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and dressing them down for their idolatry and social injustices. The prophecy focuses on the coming judgment God is about to bring on Israel with His chosen instrument, the Assyrians, in 722 B.C. At the end of a series of visions concerning God's judgment on Israel, we read that God has plans to restore the nation of Israel:

“In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the LORD, who will do these things. “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills (Amos 9:11-12).

“In that day” refers to a time after the judgment, which God promises to pour out on Israel. According to Amos, this “day,” or period of time after the judgment of Israel, would be a time of restoration of the nation. “David's fallen tent” refers to the divided kingdom. When David ruled over Israel it was a united kingdom and it is considered the golden age of Israel. But at the time Amos was prophesying, the kingdom was divided and Israel was at a moral and political low point. God, through Amos, was saying that in a day in the future He would unify the nation of Israel and make it like it was in the days of David, and Israel would “possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations (Gentiles) that bear my name.”

Now if we look up Edom in a standard Bible dictionary we find that “The term Edom...denotes either the name of Esau...or the Edomites collectively... or the land occupied by Esau's descendants, formerly the land of Seir... It stretched from the Wadi Zered to the Gulf of Aqabah for c. 160 km, and extended to both sides of Arabah or wilderness of Edom.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, N. Hillyer, D. Guthrie, A.R. Millard, D.J. Wiseman (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1982), 298.

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So, when God promised Israel that they would “possess the remnant of Edom,” it was a reference to political and military supremacy over their national enemies. God, through Amos, prophesies that there would be a time in the future after the exile of Israel when the nation of Israel would have military supremacy over its enemies, political re-unification, and of course the expansion of its physical borders to its original size under David’s leadership.

When you turn to your New Testament you will find Amos 9:11-13 quoted by Luke who was recording the words of James in Acts chapter 15. In this section of the book of Acts, the Jerusalem council is meeting to discuss the questions: Can Gentiles be included in the people of God? If so, were Gentiles also required to keep the Mosaic Law? James addresses the first of these questions by quoting the book of Amos:

When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: " 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.'

"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. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (Acts 15:13-21).

James interprets Amos 9:11-12 to mean that God does save Gentiles and they too should be included in the people of God. We also know from James’ interpretation that the phrase “after these things” in Amos 9 refers to this period in which God is saving Gentiles, that is from Pentecost to the second coming of Christ. James understood that the period of time Amos prophesied about was actually taking place in the 1st century A.D.! He believed that the re-unification and restoration of Israel was happening. But it clearly wasn’t a national re-unification because it included non-Israelites, and Israel the nation was securely under the thumb of Rome at that time.

There is something else that is important in Acts 15. Notice that the reference to Edom seems to have been removed and the action resulting from the restoration of Israel has changed from possession of enemies to

God's election from among all peoples of the world. The restoration of national Israel in Amos 9 is interpreted by God in Acts 15 to refer to the gathering of God's elect, both Jews and Gentiles, to be saved and brought together into the church. This is not left to some time in the future, but it was happening in the first century and it is happening now. This was not a political restoration of ethnic Israel, but a spiritual restoration of people from all nations.

In Amos 9, God spoke to the Jews about the New Covenant era. He spoke about the amazing things he would do in the future for His people. But He did so in the language of the picture. God spoke about this in terms of Davidic kingship, material wealth, and political and military power. This is the language of the physical kingdom. But we find that in the fulfillment of this prophecy the language of the physical kingdom and the physical people of God is interpreted in terms of the spiritual kingdom and the spiritual people of God. Amos was inspired to describe the New Covenant era in the language of the Old Covenant. Luke and James were inspired to interpret that language for us.

### **Jeremiah 33 and Hebrews 7**

One of the passages in which God promises Israel the physical land of Palestine and that He will raise up many Levitical priests to offer sacrifices is Jeremiah 33. This is another instance of a prophet describing the New Covenant fulfillment in the language of the Old Covenant picture. Consider the context: Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah during the time leading up to their exile in 586 B.C. In the chapter preceding our text, Jeremiah has given the people a clear message that they are guilty and will be exiled by the Babylonians. Chapters 30-33 are a bright spot in the book where God gives Jeremiah some good news. This good news is that after the exile God is going to restore Israel to a grandeur that not even Solomon was able to deliver. In Chapter 31 there is the promise of a New Covenant that is meant to bring hope to the people of Israel as they look toward the future. In chapter 32, God tells Jeremiah to buy some real estate just outside of Jerusalem to show the Israelites that God is not done with them. He will restore Israel in the Promised Land and love them as His own people. In chapter 33, after reviewing the promised judgment that will take place, God speaks about how He will restore His people:

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“ Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city (Jerusalem) will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.’ “This is what the LORD says: ‘You say about this place, “It is a desolate waste, without men or animals.” Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither men nor animals, there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, “Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever.” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,’ says the LORD. “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In this place, desolate and without men or animals—in all its towns there will again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah, flocks will again pass under the hand of the one who counts them,’ says the LORD (Jeremiah 33:6-13).

In these verses God promises that He will not only spiritually restore Judah, but that He will give them prosperity in a rebuilt Jerusalem. God promises to give the Israelites material wealth and physical peace from their enemies after their 70 year long exile is over. This is an unambiguous promise to restore the physical Israelites into the physical land and give them health and wealth. These promises are specific to Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. Notice that the promises are linked to Messianic promises:

“ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. “ ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness’ (Jeremiah 33:14-16).

This promise of a “Branch” and his connection to David is very similar to Isaiah 4:2; 6:13; 9:7; 11:1, which are fulfilled in Matthew 2:23. It is clearly a messianic promise in which, according to the language of the text, the Messiah will be doing what is just and right in the land of

Palestine. He will save Judah (physically) and Jerusalem will be safe from her enemies.

For this is what the LORD says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices' (Jeremiah 33:17,18).

In these verses we not only see a promise of eternal kingship in the line of David, but an eternal Levitical priesthood who will continually offer burnt offerings, grain offerings, and animal sacrifices.

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD says: 'If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore'" (Jeremiah 33:19-22).

This promise couldn't be clearer. One or many of David's descendants will reign over Israel and Judah forever and there will be "countless" Levitical priests ministering presumably in the temple doing sacrifices forever.

This passage bristles with problems without the hermeneutic of NCT. Even the messianic promises are problematic here. Certainly the promised king in David's line who will reign forever is clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This fulfillment is a bit surprising because before the cross one would have expected a dynastic fulfillment to this promise involving a succession of kings ruling over the nation of Israel. But we know now that the prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is in David's genealogical line, but lives forever. Although Jesus is clearly reigning now according to Peter in Acts 2:24-36 and the book of Hebrews (1:3), Jesus does not rule and never has ruled as a political leader over the nation of Israel. Geo-political rule is clearly what Jeremiah speaks about. This is a problem for those who believe that it is necessary to have a specific one for one fulfillment of the prophecy. Instead of one for one literal fulfillment, it is better to see the language concerning geo-political rule over the nation of Israel as God using the language of the picture

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(the physical kingdom and the physical nation) to describe the fulfillment that involves the spiritual kingdom and the spiritual people.

The promise of an eternal Levitical priesthood offering animal and grain sacrifices is difficult, if not impossible to interpret in harmony with the New Testament without using the hermeneutic described here. In the book of Hebrews Christ is specifically said to be the one high priest who offers the one sacrifice. He is specifically said to belong to the tribe of Judah, not Levi. This one eternal priest makes the many sinful Old Covenant priests obsolete. His one effective sacrifice exposes their many sacrifices to be weak, useless and unable to take away sins:

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever (Hebrews 7:23-28).

It would seem that a reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood would be to jump backward into the types and shadows. Can you imagine, after having the one perfect and eternal priest who has made the perfect sacrifice, going back to weak and useless priests offering the blood of bulls and goats? Hebrews 10 tells us that the whole system of worship including the law and the priesthood was “only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (v. 1). The entire setup with the tabernacle, the priests, and the sacrifices were wonderful in that they pointed to the realities, but they themselves were not the realities.

When Jeremiah speaks of a restoration of the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, an eternal dynasty sitting on the throne of David ruling Israel and keeping them safe, and an eternal and exceedingly numerous Levitical priesthood continuously making sacrifices, he is using the language of the picture to describe God’s New Covenant fulfillment; one that is far better than the Old Covenant pictures.



## *Chapter* **Chapter 8**

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### Does Romans 11 Say There Is A Special Future For Israel?

I want to propose an interpretation of Romans 11 that I believe flows out of New Covenant Theology. Romans 11 is a very difficult passage of Scripture. All difficult passages of Scripture will have a variety of understandings depending on one's hermeneutic and one's understanding of the immediate and larger context. As I have wrestled with this passage of Scripture I have come to some conclusions based on my overall understanding of how Scripture fits together.

I want you to know my conclusions ahead of time so you can mull them over as you think through my argument. God's evaluation of Israel has remained consistent throughout biblical history: Israel has always been a nation of unbelievers. This evaluation reaches a fever pitch in the Gospels and the book of Acts. In fact, in the book of Acts it seems as if God has turned His back on all Israelites forever and is only in the business of saving Gentiles. This understanding of biblical history is foundational to following Paul's argument in Romans 11. The Gentiles in Rome were becoming arrogant. They were beginning to think that they were the new chosen people, and that God was utterly finished with the Jews. Paul is attempting to remind those Gentiles in the church at Rome that God will still save those Jews who repent and believe. The thrust of Paul's argument in Romans 11 is quite simply that God still saves Jews and will continue to do so throughout the New Covenant era. In light of this, let's turn our attention to Scripture and examine Paul's careful argument.

### The Argument of Romans 9 and 10

It should not be surprising that Paul's message in Romans 9 and 10 is extremely important for our understanding of Romans 11. In these chapters Paul drives home three main points: (1) God has always saved only a remnant of Israel; (2) God has the right to show mercy, or harden, whoever He desires; and (3) Israel has rebelled against God throughout her history. I want to track this thought process throughout Romans 9-10 in order to provide you with an accurate understanding of the context of Romans 11.

In Romans 9, after Paul recalls all of the amazing privileges God has given to Israel over the centuries, he causes us to readjust our thinking. Because of all of their privileges and promises, one wonders why they seemed to have so totally rejected this great salvation Paul describes in Romans 8. One might think God has gone back on His promises or that He has been unable to overcome Israel's rebelliousness. But Paul tells us that we must forsake the idea that all of Israel *ever* was God's true people. Instead, only a portion of Israel has ever been believers: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Romans 9:6). Paul is concerned with showing that God's promises to Israel have not failed, and he goes to great lengths to make sure that these promises are correctly understood. The physical nation of Israel was never promised eternal salvation. Paul argues that this has always been a revealed truth by showing God's sovereignty in election among the children of Abraham and Isaac:

Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:7-13).

Unlike Isaac and Ishmael—who were children of different mothers—Jacob and Esau not only had the same mother, but also were created in the same act of conception! But God chose to set His saving love on Jacob and not Esau. God's promise of salvation to the descendants of

Abraham did not fail. However Esau, who was clearly a child of Abraham, was not saved. This leaves a bit of a theological problem for us. Paul's answer to this problem is two-fold: First, since God is the creator He can have mercy on whomever He wants and harden whomever He wants (vv. 14-21). Second, God has always promised to save only a remnant of the physical descendants of Abraham, and He will continue to do so:

“Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.’ ‘For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.’ It is just as Isaiah said previously: ‘Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah’” (Romans 9:27-29).

At the end of Romans 9 and continuing through Romans 10, Paul introduces the fact that God has given faith to the Gentiles, while the Jews who had everything were unable to find God:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone” (Romans 9:30-32).

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul makes the argument that the Gentiles responded to God's offer of salvation while the Israelites rebelled: “And Isaiah boldly says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.’ But concerning Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people’” (Romans 10:20-21). Thus, Paul has established the truths that, (1) God has always saved only a remnant of Israel, (2) God has the right to show mercy, or to harden, whoever He desires, and (3) Israel has rebelled against God throughout her history. Now the Apostle can build the rest of his argument concerning Israel on these foundational truths.

### **Romans 11: *When is Paul Writing About?***

Before we examine the “ins and outs” of Paul's argument in Romans 11, it is important that we establish the time period about which Paul is writing. The majority of commentators hold that Paul is carefully building an argument about the salvation of national Israel—

reaching its climax in verses 25 and 26—concluding that in the *distant future* all or most of national Israel will be saved. But the passage seems to refer exclusively to the present time in Paul's day. There is overwhelming evidence in the passage that Paul is concerned with the *present time* rather than the future.

### The Evidence

- In Romans 11:1, Paul's answer to the question about whether God had rejected His people deals with Paul's first century salvation, not something in the distant future.
- In verse 5, Paul answers the question about God's rejection of Israel with a reference to his contemporary situation: "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace."
- In verses 13 and 14 Paul refers to his hope that his own evangelistic work with the Gentiles in the first century will arouse Israelites in that general time period to envy the Gentiles for having God's salvation: "I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them."
- Paul sees a pattern in the amazing wisdom of God, revealing the mystery of His plan: The God-ordained fall of Israel led, and is leading to, the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their (some Jews) salvation. The pattern is: Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation. In verses 30 and 31 Paul tells us that the salvation of the Gentiles—which leads to the jealousy of the Jews, which leads to the salvation of the Jews—was all taking place "now" in Paul's day: "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you" (Romans 11:30-31).

### Did God Reject His People? No! Remember the Remnant

In verse 1 of Romans 11, Paul asks the question that remains the central focus of the entire chapter: "I ask then: Did God reject his

people?” Now there are two possibilities concerning the meaning of Paul’s question. First, he could be asking, “Did God reject Israel as a nation of people and their future salvation?” The second possibility is that he could be asking, “Did God *utterly* reject Israel so that no more Israelites will ever be saved?” Paul makes it clear that the meaning of his question is certainly the latter, because his answer in verse 1 is that God is presently, in Paul’s day, saving a remnant: “By no means (God has not rejected His people)! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” The evidence—that Paul is a Jew and that he has been saved—tells us that God has not utterly rejected Israel.

Our investigation so far has led us in the opposite direction of the most popular interpretation. Paul begins his argument not arguing for the salvation of the majority of ethnic Israel in the distant future, but rather the salvation of a tiny remnant of ethnic Israel in Paul’s day. This line of argument continues through verse 5:

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah--how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. (11:2-5).

Paul asks the same question and gives the same answer all over again in verse 7: “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.” At first, given Israel’s rejection of the gospel, you might think that none of Israel obtained salvation, but Paul assures us here in verse 7 that there were elect within Israel and they were saved just as he assured us earlier in verses 1, 4, and 5.

### Dealing with Difficult Language

Most commentators think that Paul changes tracks in his argument at verse 11. Douglas Moo neatly divides the passage into two sections: “Israel’s rejection is neither total (11:1-10) nor final (11:11-32).”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Douglas Moo, “The Epistle to the Romans,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Gordon D. Fee, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 683.

According to Moo, verses 1-10 deal with the remnant as I do, but Moo thinks that verses 11-32 address the future of national Israel. Yet verse 11 seems to give no evidence of any change in Paul's argument: "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious."

The envy of Israel is happening at the time of Paul's writing. The question in verse 11 remains the same as it was in verse 1. That much is clear. The difficulty with my view begins in the next verse. Verse 12 introduces language which, upon first reading, seems to introduce an eschatological and total future salvation of Israel: "But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater **riches will** their **fullness** bring!" This language continues in verse 15: "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their **acceptance** be but **life from the dead**?" I have already introduced a pattern of thought that I believe is part of the warp and woof of Paul's thinking in this passage: *God ordained the fall of Israel which led and is leading to the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their (some Jews) salvation. The pattern is: Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation.* The chart below notes parallels between verses with this pattern of thought. You will notice that some of the more difficult language found in verses 12 and 15 can be explained by other verses that express the same thought in clearer language:

**Does Romans 11 Say There Is A Special Future For Israel?**

Disobedience (Jews)	Salvation (Gentiles)	Envy (Jews)	Salvation (Jews)
11- Rather, because of their transgression	salvation has come to the Gentiles	to make Israel envious.	
12- But if their transgression means	riches for the world,		How much more will their fullness bring!
and their loss means	riches for the Gentiles,		
13-	In as much as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry	14- in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy	and save some of them
15- For if their rejection	is the reconciliation of the world		what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?
25- Israel has experienced a hardening	until the full number of the Gentiles has come in		And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:
30- as a result of their disobedience	Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy		
31- so they too have now become disobedient	as a result of God's mercy to you		in order that they too may now receive mercy

Some of the most difficult pieces of Romans 11 for my particular understanding of this passage are listed under the “Salvation (Jews)” section. But notice that Paul seems to repeat the same thought using different language: “fullness,” “their acceptance,” and “all Israel will be saved” is stating the same thought as “save some of them” and “that they too may now receive mercy.” I freely admit that the language Paul uses at times seems to argue for the interpretation of a future full national salvation of Israel. But the remnant and partial salvation language is equally strong. In addition, understanding Paul as consistently speaking about the salvation of the remnant also has the added bonus of being the driving force of the argument. The idea that all of ethnic Israel will

someday in the distant future be saved seems totally foreign to the larger context.

### **Boastful Gentiles Rebuked**

We must try to jump into the sandals (and perhaps togas) of the Gentile Christians that Paul is addressing in the church in Rome. The Gentile Christians had experienced nothing but grief from the hands of the Jews. It seemed as if the Jews were constantly persecuting them (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1, 12:1-5, 17:5-9). Remember that they had all read (or heard) the story about both Jesus and Paul turning from the Jews to the Gentiles with the gospel. They had begun to believe that they were now God's true people, and that the Jews were no longer in God's plan of salvation. Paul gives a stinging rebuke to these Gentiles for carelessly dismissing the Jews:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree (Romans 11:17-24)!

Notice that the thrust of Paul's argument is not as the popular interpretation would have us believe, that there will be an overwhelming conversion of national Israel in the distant future. Rather, the Apostle seems to say: "You think Israel is entirely rejected and you Gentiles have a corner on the market of salvation. You are wrong. It is actually more natural for Jews to be saved than for Gentiles to be saved."

### **"Until" (*achris hou*) in verse 25**

The word "until" in verse 25 creates great amounts of confusion. Here is the verse: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery,

brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **until** the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” Many assume that this verse must mean that the partial hardening of Israel will continue up to the point in time when the final Gentile is saved. At that point in time, the partial hardening will cease and all Israel will repent and believe. This understanding of the verse is a contextual train wreck, in that it introduces thoughts that are utterly new to the argument. This interpretation neglects an important option for our understanding of the Greek phrase underlying the word “until” in verse 25. “Until” is a translation of the Greek phrase *achris hou*. “The phrase brings matters ‘up to’ a certain point or ‘until’ a certain goal is reached. It does not itself determine the state of affairs after the termination. The subsequent circumstances can be learned only from the context.”<sup>22</sup>

- Acts 22:4 “I persecuted the followers of this Way to (*achris hou*) their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.” Notice, the use of our phrase here is focused on the goal of persecuting Christians to death and not the state of affairs after they are dead.
- Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to (*achris hou*) dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Once again the emphasis is not on what happens beyond the division of soul and spirit, but the goal or termination point.
- 1 Corinthians 11:26 “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until (*achris hou*) he comes.” The point of “until” in this verse is that you proclaim the Lord's death by participating in the Lord's Supper all the way to the goal or

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<sup>22</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 179. I am indebted to Robertson for this whole line of thought. Although his conclusion on “all Israel” differs slightly from the one presented here, I highly recommend his book.

termination point, which is the Lord's return. Our phrase has no reference to the state of affairs after His return.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in Romans 11:25 the use of "until" (*achris hou*) does not refer to the state of affairs occurring after the goal or termination point: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **until** the full number of the Gentiles has come in." Just what happens after the full number of Gentiles has come in, which is the termination point, is not addressed in this verse. But we do know from our examination of the passage up to this point that Israel has experienced this partial hardening and that there has always been a tiny remnant of Israelites that God calls to himself. *There will continue to be a remnant of believers in Israel and a majority of unbelievers all the way up to the time when the full number of Gentiles come in.* The popular view says, "Okay, I can live with that. The very next verse tells us exactly what happens *after* the termination point when the full number of Gentiles come in, and that is that the entire nation of Israel will be saved." Not so fast! Now that we have established that "until" does not emphasize what happens after the full number of Gentiles come in, let's see if verse 26 refers to that or not.

#### **"And so (*kai houtos*) All Israel Shall Be Saved"**

The Greek phrase *kai houtos* is often read incorrectly as "and then..." which gives it a temporal flavor. But in the 205 times that it is used in the New Testament, it never has an unambiguously temporal meaning. It is far better to read it as "and in this way or in this manner..." This fits the context perfectly. Paul is emphasizing the amazing way or manner in which God has chosen for all of the elect of Israel to be saved. In fact, the particular manner in which God plans to save His elect within Israel is the revelation of a mystery in the all-wise plan of God (Romans 11:33-36). The emphasis of verse 26 is the *pattern* in which God will save His people, rather than the *amount* of Israelites to be saved. The God-ordained fall of Israel led, and is leading to, the salvation of the Gentiles. That is amazing. But what makes one

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<sup>23</sup> Two more examples of this are found in the following verses: Matthew 24:38 "For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to (*achris hou*) the day Noah entered the ark;" 1 Corinthians 15:25 "For he must reign until (*achris hou*) he has put all his enemies under his feet."

positively marvel at God's wisdom is that the salvation of the Gentiles is causing Jews to become jealous, which was leading to their salvation in Paul's day and right now!

So, the point of Romans 11:26 is not something absolutely new to the context—that God is going to save every last ethnic Israelite who happens to be alive after the final elect Gentile has come to faith. Instead, it is better to interpret verse 26 within the framework of Paul's argument: that God has not forsaken the Jews entirely, but even from within this rebellious people God has his elect. This was shocking news to the Gentiles. They had seen and heard about Jesus' and Paul's rejection of the Jews, who were still unbelieving and were persecuting the church. As we saw, Paul adds more to his argument than just those bare facts. He gives us a glimpse at the all-wise plan of God! God not only used the fall of Israel to bring salvation to the Gentiles, but He is using the salvation of the Gentiles to stir up jealousy and bring elect Israelites to salvation. This will continue all the way up *until* the full number of the Gentiles come to faith.

### **What Does "All Israel" Mean?**

There are five options to consider:<sup>24</sup>

1. All ethnic descendants of Abraham. This option is knocked out in Romans 9:6.
2. All ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a special working among the Jewish people. This option and option #3 are variations on the most popular interpretation. These options specifically miss the emphasis on the contemporary nature of Paul's argument, as well as the consistent and sustained emphasis on the remnant of Israel.
3. The majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving activity of God. In addition to the comments made above about this option, it has the added burden of explaining how "all" means "most."

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 183. Robertson laid out the general framework for me but I take the blame for the additional comments.

4. All elect Israelites within ethnic Israel. I believe this is the strongest view, given the continual differentiation between Israel and the Gentiles in Romans 9-11, as well as the emphasis on the elect or the remnant within Israel. This interpretation still allows 'all' to mean every last one of a particular group, which in this case is all of the elect ethnic Israelites.
5. Both Jews and Gentiles who together constitute the church of Christ, the Israel of God. Lee Irons has an excellent paper arguing for this conclusion called "Paul's Theology of Israel's Future: A Non-Millennial Interpretation of Romans 11."<sup>25</sup> But it is hard for me to get around the consistent emphasis throughout Romans 9-11 that differentiates between Gentiles and ethnic Israel. I could still buy Irons' argument if it weren't for the verses immediately after verse 26 that once again differentiate between the two groups:

As far as the gospel is concerned, **they** are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, **they** are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as **you** who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of **their** disobedience, so **they** too have now become disobedient in order that **they** too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to **you** (Romans 11:28-31).

### Conclusion

I don't believe that Romans 11 teaches that there is a promise for a national future salvation for all of ethnic Israel. In this passage, Israel is guaranteed that God's salvation is still available to any Jew who repents and believes. If my method of arriving at theological truth were "counting the noses" of the great men who have held to a particular understanding of Scripture, then I would certainly believe that Romans 11 teaches about a future national redemptive event for Israel after all elect Gentiles are saved. Some of the famous noses I would count would be those of Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Herman Ridderbos, George E. Ladd, Geerhardus Vos, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, John Murray. The list could go on and on. Each of these amazing theologians

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<sup>25</sup> *The Reformation and Revival Journal* (Eschatology - Volume 6, Number 2 - Spring 1997).

dwarfs me in his knowledge of the Word, his natural abilities, and his industriousness. But after counting their noses and considering their learned opinions on Romans 11, I think that they all came to the wrong conclusion. I know it sounds like *hubris*, but when I read their interpretation of Scripture and stack it up against my reading of Scripture, I am unpersuaded of their learned opinions. The fact that such an amazing group of Christian scholars has a different interpretation of Scripture than I do certainly gives me pause, and causes me to re-examine my point of view with a critical eye. But at the end of the day I cannot arrive at theological truth by counting noses. I can use the opinions of great men as a guide, but I must weigh their opinions and see if they persuade me or not. I believe each theologian in the list above would agree with me that nose counting is no way to arrive at theological truth.



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SECTION **3**

*Questions  
About*

**LAW**



## Chapter 9

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### Is New Covenant Theology Antinomian?

This is a common question asked about NCT. Let me begin by saying as forcefully as possible, “NO!” Of course, the question deserves a fuller answer than that. So let me begin by trying to come to terms with the term antinomian. Antinomianism is a heresy that is incompatible with authentic Christianity. The term *antinomianism* refers to the belief that Christians do not have biblical law that they must obey today.<sup>26</sup> That is, it is the belief that Christians are “lawless” people. A belief that is necessarily connected to *antinomianism* is that Christians cannot sin. Sin is defined in Scripture as breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4). If there is no law, then it is impossible to sin. A life of wickedness, of course,

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<sup>26</sup>There is wide but not universal agreement on the meaning of the term. Most reference works define antinomianism as I have above. *Wikipedia* defines antinomianism as follows: “Antinomianism, or lawlessness, in theology is the idea that members of a particular religious group are under no obligation to obey the laws of ethics or morality as presented by religious authorities. Antinomianism is the polar opposite of legalism, the notion that obedience to a code of religious law is necessary for salvation” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antinomianism>). *Webster’s Dictionary Online* defines an Antinomian as: “One who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation” (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/antinomianism>). William R. Godfrey writes: “Antinomianism so stresses Christian freedom from the condemnation of the law that it underemphasizes the need of the believer to confess sins daily and to pursue sanctification earnestly. It may fail to teach that sanctification inevitably follows justification” (*The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, J.I. Packer, Downers Grove: IVP, 1988, s.v. “Law and Gospel”).

But there are those reference works that define antinomianism as breaking the moral law of the Old Testament. An example can be found in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*: “The word comes from the Greek *anti* (against) and *nomos* (law), and refers to the doctrine that it is not necessary for Christians to preach and/ or obey the moral law of the OT” (ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984, s.v. “Antinomianism,” by R. D. Linder). Although there may be historical roots to this definition, using this definition begs the theological question of which laws God requires His people to obey in the New Covenant era. In addition, the latter definition makes no distinction between those who believe that Christians are free from all law and those who believe that Christians must follow the law of Christ found in the pages of the New Testament.

results from such an abhorrent belief. Thus, *antinomianism* is a longstanding heresy that is fought against by all faithful Christians.

In theological circles the term *antinomianism* is much like the term *child abuse*. It is usually said in a whisper because it is so scandalous. It is important that we carefully consider the words we choose to use. Consider the following fictional exchange:

“The Bible encourages *child abuse*! Aren’t you appalled and shocked?”

“Wait a minute! How does it encourage *child abuse*? The Bible never tells us to brutalize our children.”

“No, it does something far more dangerous! It encourages *child abuse* because it teaches us that we need to tell our children that they are sinners. That abuses their self-esteem! Such treatment of a child’s delicate psyche is far more brutal than mere physical *abuse*.”

Now before you get too excited, I don’t believe that the Bible encourages child abuse. I am a firm believer in telling our children the gospel, which consists of both the bad news and the good news. I want my child to have Christ-esteem, not self-esteem. The purpose of the dialogue above was to make the point that the words we use matter. The way in which the phrase *child abuse* was used above, not only slanders the one being falsely accused and connects a label to him that is hard to shake, but it trivializes the awful crime itself! In the same way, some people have chosen to call NCT an *antinomian* system of theology. Doing so breeds serious misunderstanding of NCT and trivializes true *antinomianism*.

Writers and teachers are in the word business. Words are the tools of their trades. For Christian theologians, the skill of explaining the use of Greek and Hebrew words is a necessity since those are the original languages of the Scriptures. But the use of words and therefore language—Greek and Hebrew included—is governed by rules. We need to be careful how we use Greek and Hebrew. If we are not careful we wind up making a big mess and hurting people. An example of this can be found in Ligonier Ministries’ theological magazine called *Tabletalk* in an article that appeared in 2002 critiquing NCT’s view of the law:

NCT even sounds a clear alarm against antinomianism. However, we must be careful to ascertain what NCT means when it speaks of antinomianism. We must ask: Against what law? And what does the word *against* mean? Does it mean against altogether? Could it mean against in part? The prefix *anti* has various nuances. It can mean ‘against,’ ‘instead of,’ or ‘in place of.’ In

other words, although NCT may not be against law in an absolute sense, if it denies the moral law of the Old Testament is the moral law of the New Testament, and if it replaces the moral law with another, then it is antinomian on two counts.<sup>27</sup>

Notice, the meaning of the word *antinomian* now no longer has a fixed definition. Neither the context nor its consistent historical usage determines what the word means. The author tells us that the meaning of *antinomian* is now determined by the flexibility of the Greek prefix *anti*. He broadens the meaning of the word to include one who does not see that all of the OT “moral law” is applicable today. It also could mean one who sees one law being used in place of another. With this transformation of the meaning of the word, suddenly NCT can be labeled *antinomian*.

Is this really a proper use of Greek? Consider what happens if we are simply consistent with the author’s argument concerning the definition of antinomianism and apply it to that which all Christians believe: We learned that *anti* can mean “against all of something” or “against *part* of something.” No Christian believes that the laws that regulated sacrifices, the laws that regulated how Israelites planted their fields, or how they kept their beards are still binding today. Therefore, all Christians are against *part* of the Old Covenant law, so they must all be *antinomian*! This conclusion is, of course, unacceptable and shows us how careful we need to be with our words.

In the same article we find further criticism of NCT that we need to consider: “ ‘Moderate antinomianism’ has resurfaced under a new banner...New Covenant Theology (NCT) extols the Lordship of Christ in Christian ethics, which we applaud (Westminster Confession of Faith, 19:5), but it does so at the expense of moral law.”<sup>28</sup> Now, if this statement were to go unqualified, New Covenant Theology would seem to be an utter contradiction. How does one extol Lordship, and yet do away with moral law? Isn’t the essence of Lordship obedience to Christ? Aren’t Christ’s commands and the commands of the Apostles considered God’s laws? Aren’t these laws moral in their character so that if one were to disobey any of these laws it would be sinful? Yes. So what does the author mean when he uses the term “moral law”? He uses the term “moral law” in a very specific way. When you hear this you

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Barcellos, “The Death of the Decalogue,” *Tabletalk* [September 2002]: 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

immediately think of absolute standards of right and wrong. But many people define “moral law” specifically as the Ten Commandments. Because NCT views the Decalogue as no longer binding on believers in the New Covenant era and many people believe the Ten Commandments are the unchanging “moral law of God,” NCT is often considered to be *antinomian*. But to define moral law as the Ten Commandments begs the question: Does Scripture tell us that there is an unchanging moral law of God and what does Scripture say that it is?

We must not load up the term “moral law” with our theological presuppositions.<sup>29</sup> New Covenant Theologians are trying to guard against such mistakes while taking biblical law seriously. If you are a believer, what law you are to obey is a very big deal. The primary way we express our love for God is through obedience to His commands. How can I love my Lord if I don’t know what He wants me to do? How can I avoid sinning against Him?

NCT embraces the law of Christ, which is the law that is applicable to believers today. The law of Christ includes the commands given by Christ<sup>30</sup> and His Apostles. There are many, many laws in the New Covenant Scriptures and space constraints will not allow me to list them all, but just a few of the many laws that believers must obey in the New Covenant era are found in the book of Ephesians:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all

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<sup>29</sup> Michael W. Adams wrote an excellent unpublished paper on this subject that can be found at: [www.ncbf.net/PDF/Moral\\_Law.pdf](http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/Moral_Law.pdf)

<sup>30</sup>Not every command given by Christ is applicable today. The Gospels are records of a period that is still technically the Old Covenant era. During the period of Christ’s ministry, He was under the Old Covenant while talking a lot about the New Covenant era. Consider the account of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees in Matthew 23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (23:23). Believers in the New Covenant era are responsible to be just, merciful and faithful, but we can in fact “neglect” tithing our spices because that is not part of the law in the New Covenant era.

## Is New Covenant Theology Antinomian?

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bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:25-32).

These are very specific laws that all believers must obey, and when they do not, they sin. So, let's put this critique of NCT to bed now. NCT is not antinomian. The question concerning law that NCT asks believers to consider is not "Do believers have to obey any of God's laws today?" But rather, "Which of the many laws in Scripture does God want His children to obey in the New Covenant era?"



## Chapter 10

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### How Can An Unchangeable God Have A Law That Changes?

This question is often asked by Covenant Theologians because they are genuinely troubled by NCT's understanding of biblical law. I want to say from the outset that it is a logical question. The premises and the conclusion that is drawn from them are logical. Although the reasoning is logical, I don't think that it is biblical. Let me show you the argument in the form of a syllogism so that it will be easier to work with:

1. **God's law is based on His righteousness and holiness, which are aspects of His character.**
2. **God is immutable. His character does not change.**
3. **Therefore, God's law cannot change.**

This argument looks good. The problem is that Scripture says in crystal clear terms that God's law changes: "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a **change of the law**" (Hebrews 7:11-12). Therefore, there is a problem with the argument.

Someone might object, "Hebrews 7:11-12 is only referring to the laws governing the Old Covenant priesthood. Look at the context and

you will find that it is addressing the fact that the law stipulating that a priest must be from the tribe of Levi would rule out the possibility of our Lord (who was of the tribe of Judah) from becoming a priest. Therefore that law had to change. But God's moral laws reflect God's character and they never change."

I heartily agree that the context of Hebrews 7:11-12 is about the Old Covenant laws pertaining to the priesthood. But how can we pick and choose which laws reflect God's righteousness and holiness? Wasn't God's law that said only Levites could become priests based on His holy character? Wouldn't it have been immoral for a Benjamite or a Judahite to walk into the tabernacle or the temple and begin to perform sacrifices on behalf of the people? The person saying that God's law cannot change based on these points above means "God's moral law" cannot change—meaning the Ten Commandments.

While making a distinction between the kinds of laws found in the Old or New Covenants can be helpful, there is nothing in Scripture itself that gives us a guideline to make such a distinction. How do we determine which laws are moral and which are civil or ceremonial? Where does it say that only certain parts of the Mosaic Law passed away, while others remain in force? The practice of dividing law into moral and non-moral categories is difficult if not impossible to support biblically. Consider Leviticus 19:19: "Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." An Old Covenant Israelite was sinning if he or she planted peas and carrots together, wore a mixed-blend shirt, or mated a horse and a donkey to get a mule. The Old Covenant Israelite was *morally* obligated to obey these holy laws. Do you see the problem with dividing God's law up into moral, civil and ceremonial categories? *All* of God's law is moral and based on the holy and righteous character of God.

Let's consider two different laws that change significantly from the Old Covenant era to the New Covenant era. Both of these laws can fit neatly into the category that many theologians call "moral law."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Of course I am sure there are some who might not consider the laws I have chosen to examine as "moral law." The whole problem with categorizing law into these groupings is that it is a very subjective practice.

## Giving

We'll begin by examining the law of God concerning giving in the Old Covenant era. Under the Mosaic Law several tithes were required:

- The Israelites were commanded to give a general tithe (tithe simply means 10%) to the Levites who, in turn, had to give 10% of that (Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-24).
- The Israelites had to give a festival tithe used for an annual festival and that which was left over was given to the Levites (Deuteronomy 14:22-27).
- Every third year God commanded the Israelites to give an additional tithe for the Levites and the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).
- God also commanded the Israelites to do some additional giving:
  1. Corners, gleanings, forgotten sheaves (Leviticus 19:9, Deuteronomy 24:19)
  2. Firstfruits (Deuteronomy 26:1-10)
  3. The Lord's tithe (Leviticus 27:30)
  4. Freewill offerings (Deuteronomy 16:10, Leviticus 22:18-23)

Notice the detailed commands for giving that God gave the Israelites. These tithes were not optional. It was God's holy law that you gave exactly according to these specifications. If you did not give as stipulated above, you were sinning against God by breaking His holy law.

There is much material in the New Covenant Scriptures about how we are to handle our money. The warnings about the danger of being consumed by our desires for material wealth are all over the New Testament. But when it comes to commands about what amount we are to give toward kingdom work, God's New Covenant commands stand in contrast to the Mosaic Law. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 Paul writes: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." There is no legislated amount of giving in the New Covenant era. Israelites living under the Mosaic Law were under compulsion to give. There was no freedom as to the amount of money and possessions one could give to God. It was legislated. The Law of Christ is completely different when it

comes to giving. Each believer is to examine his situation and his heart and give as much as he desires. There are great and important theological reasons for this difference in the two versions of law, but for our purposes it is sufficient to simply note the radical difference in God's law in these two eras. God's law has changed but God remains the same.

### Divorce

Let's consider another example of a change in God's law by looking at Jesus' teaching on divorce:

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. (Matthew 19:3-11).

Jesus tells us that the Mosaic Law gave greater license for divorce than before that time (Adam to Moses) or after that time (Pentecost to the second coming of Christ). Jesus explains that the Mosaic Law gave greater license because the Israelites were hard-hearted (which is another way of saying that they were unbelievers).

When Jesus referred to the Mosaic Law concerning divorce he was thinking of Deuteronomy 24. We know that because it is the only passage in the Old Testament that details God's will concerning divorce in the Old Covenant era:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband

dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord . Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

These verses are part of the Mosaic Law that was given by God. When Jesus attributed these words to Moses in Matthew 19, He was not saying that they were Moses' ideas and not part of God's holy law. He was simply referring to Moses as the mediator of God's covenant in which that particular law was given so that His audience might have a point of reference.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 tells us that if a man found something wrong with his wife he could divorce her as long as he gave her a certificate of divorce. There is some controversy over what the phrase "something indecent" means. We do know that it can't mean something equivalent to adultery because unlawful sexual relations were punished by death. Not only would divorce have been unnecessary, but remarriage for the offender would also have been unnecessary to address since she would have been dead (Leviticus 18, 20:10). Also, Jesus is very clear that the regulation in Deuteronomy 24 is not as strict as what He laid down in Matthew 19. Deuteronomy 24 must be allowing divorce for something other than adultery. If a man decided to divorce his wife, he then had to give her a certificate of divorce. After doing that, the husband was free to marry another. But there was one prohibition that then applied to him. If the recently divorced wife got married to another man and then divorced that man, the first husband could not remarry her.

Now let's compare and contrast the law that Jesus gives in Matthew 19<sup>32</sup> to that which God gives through Moses in Deuteronomy 24:

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<sup>32</sup> This comparison in Matthew 19 only addresses the issue of a biblical divorce due to unrepentant adultery. But Scripture also clearly allows for a biblical divorce in the case of desertion (1 Corinthians 7).

## Questions About Law

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Mosaic Law	Law of Christ
It was given to hard-hearted (unbelieving) people.	It is only given to believing people.
Divorce was permitted for some “indecency” less than adultery.	Divorce only is permitted in the case of unrepentant adultery.
Remarriage is permitted in all circumstances except to one’s former spouse after she has been remarried and divorced again.	Remarriage is forbidden in all circumstances except in divorces that are caused by adultery. Anyone who marries someone who has had an unbiblical divorce as a believer is in an unlawful or adulterous relationship.

Was Deuteronomy 24 part of God’s law? Yes. Was that law based on God’s character in that it was holy and righteous? Yes. Does Jesus Christ tell us that God’s law on divorce and remarriage has changed? Yes. Has God’s character changed? No.

Now we can look back at the syllogism and modify it so that it fits with Scripture. I have placed changes to it in italics:

- (1) *All of God’s law is based on his righteousness and holiness, which are aspects of His character.*
- (2) *God is immutable. His character does not change.*
- (3) *But God’s law in fact can change even though His character does not change.*

No matter how logical an argument sounds, we must be careful always to let Scripture define our theology.

# Chapter 11

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## Did The Mosaic Law Have A Positive Role In The Lives Of Old Covenant Believers?

This question is about the function of biblical law, particularly the function of the Mosaic Law in the Old Covenant era. This has been a matter of heated debate for a long time. It often sounds something like this: “The Mosaic Law kills and condemns!” “The Mosaic Law is gracious!” “Live by the Spirit not by the written code!” “Moses leads us to Christ and Christ leads us back to Moses!” “Antinomian!” “Legalist!” “Anabaptist!” “Papist!” The Scriptures need to be heard over the cacophony of these sloganeers and emotional outbursts. The theology of law in Scripture is too subtle and balanced for a slogan to be able to express the whole truth. Over the years I have heard many unbalanced statements about the role of law in the life of the believer from every theological camp, including those who hold to New Covenant Theology. In fact, I have made many of these unbalanced statements myself. I still cringe when I remember some of the things that I have said in the heat of theological debate. The issue of God’s law is a particularly difficult issue because it requires a delicate touch so as not to overstate matters. It is a theological balancing act. Let the balancing act begin!

### **Defining Law**

As I looked for a simple definition of biblical law I looked through several theological dictionaries, but to my surprise it was my old American Heritage Dictionary that had the simplest definition of biblical law: “The body of principles or precepts held to express the

divine will...”<sup>33</sup> Law expresses God’s moral will or the way in which God wants man to live. Behind the expression of God’s will stands God’s authority. When men do not live as God wishes, God inflicts the necessary punishment for breaking His law and shirking His authority.

The law of God is a concept that always remains the same, but the content of the law in Scripture does change. This is a simple fact about which Scripture is unambiguous. Scripture says in crystal clear terms that God’s law changes: “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law” (Hebrews 7:11-12). Although the extent of that change may be in question, the fact that the content of God’s law does change to some degree is not a matter of debate. In addition, everyone can agree with the non-controversial definition of biblical law as stated above: “The body of principles or precepts (in Scripture) held to express the divine will...” When I refer to law rather than Mosaic Law or Law of Christ, this is the definition I am working with.

### The Function of Law

Each era has a different emphasis and therefore at times it seems as if law has a different function in each era. But if this is your conclusion, you are mistaken. *Law functions the same way in every era. It condemns unbelievers and it functions as a guide for believers in how to show their love for God.* Each era emphasizes a different function of law. The Old Covenant era emphasized the condemning effects of law on the unbeliever, while the New Covenant era emphasizes the guiding function of law for believers. That is why it might seem as if the Mosaic Law *only* kills and condemns when we read what the New Covenant Scriptures say about the Mosaic Law. But, even though certain functions of law are highlighted in each era, the basic functions of law do not change. Law condemns unbelievers and guides believers. Let’s examine the condemning and guiding functions of law in each era.

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<sup>33</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1982), s.v. “Law.”

### **The Law of the Old Covenant Served to Condemn Unbelievers in that Era**

2 Corinthians 3 is a text that tells us about the condemning effects of the law of the Old Covenant. Paul is contrasting the ministry of the Old Covenant with the ministry of the New Covenant:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! (2 Corinthians 3:7-9)

The phrase “letters engraved on stone” refers to the Mosaic Law. Deuteronomy 4:13 makes this fact clear: “He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.” The Ten Commandments are the essence of the Old Covenant and therefore they are representative of the whole, even though there were many more laws included in the Old Covenant.<sup>34</sup> In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul portrays the Old Covenant as that which condemns men and produces death. Paul is highlighting that condemning role of the Old Covenant law and contrasting it with the work of the Spirit in the New Covenant. The law of the Old Covenant confronted the unbelieving Israelite with the authority of the God that he hated (although he claimed to love God). This law not only confronted the unbelieving Jew with his sinfulness by pointing out his transgressions, but it stirred up his self-centered rebellion: “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death” (Romans 7:5). The law of the Old Covenant does its perfect work of pointing out sin, arousing more rebellion, and stating God’s just condemnation on such behavior.

### **The Law of the Old Covenant Served as a Guide for Believers in that Era**

2 Corinthians 3, which explains the condemning effects of the Mosaic Law, is not the only way one can or should view the law of the

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<sup>34</sup> That is to say, one can refer to the Old Covenant by simply restating the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are not equivalent to the entire Old Covenant. But they seem to be used by God as the part of the Old Covenant to represent the whole.

Old Covenant. In Psalm 119 we find the guiding function of the Mosaic Law:

Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws. I will always obey your law, for ever and ever. I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, for I delight in your commands because I love them. I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees (Psalm 119:43-48).

David loved God and loved His holy law. David was a rare person in Israel. Not only was he the king of Israel, but he was a believer. His love for God was obvious, despite the terrible sins he committed (2 Samuel 11-12 and Psalm 51). The law did not condemn David because his sins were covered. He trusted in God and God passed over his sins. In the fullness of time God poured out His wrath on Christ for David's sins (Romans 3:25). David was a redeemed believer before the redeemer bled and died:

However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "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 4:5-8).

David was a redeemed sinner whose heart had been changed from hating God to loving God. His sins had been passed over and therefore the version of God's law that he was under (the Mosaic Law) did not condemn him. Instead, David approached the stipulations of the Old Covenant as the detailed instructions of how he could glorify the God he loved. Whether it was the laws concerning agriculture, animal husbandry, sacrifice, or loving your neighbor, David obeyed these laws happily out of love for his God. For David, the words of the Apostle John regarding the relationship of God's law to the believer applied: "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:2-4).

### **The Law of the New Covenant Serves to Condemn Unbelievers in This Era**

There are laws that apply to people in the New Covenant era. We know this because we see in Scripture that sin is still a relevant concept. It is defined as lawlessness (1 John 3:4). Paul tells us that breaking God's law in the New Covenant era brings death or condemnation from God: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). If I break God's law regarding the way I must speak in the New Covenant era ("Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Ephesians 4:29), then I have earned eternal punishment from God unless Christ takes the punishment I deserve on Himself. If I break God's law regarding the way I must relate to those who are evil to me ("Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Romans 12:14), then, once again, I find myself under God's just condemnation. These laws of the New Covenant era function exactly the same way 2 Corinthians 3 tells us that the law of the Old Covenant functioned. When the unbeliever is confronted with the holy law of Christ in the New Covenant era, it should cause him to see his sinfulness and the fact that He deserves only eternal punishment from God. This law will ultimately be the standard by which God condemns him unless he repents and believes.

The law of the Old Covenant was given to a people who were mostly unbelieving. They did not have the work of the Spirit causing them to love God—motivating them to obey. Instead, they were spiritually dead people being confronted by God's authority, which was revealed in the form of the Mosaic Law. This confrontation with God's authority only served to stir up their sin and rebellion. *The Old Covenant era and the version of the law of God in that era is the historical example used to teach us that law, by itself, cannot transform people.* That is why you have what seems like an absolute contrast between written law and the Spirit of God in Romans 7:6 "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code." It is not that once you have the Spirit you don't need any written commands from God. The main question is, "What will free us from our slavery to sin?" Law, any law, simply points out sin and further enslaves when it comes in contact with an unbelieving heart. The Spirit, given to those

who repent and believe, frees the person from slavery to sin by giving him an unquenchable love for God. It is not the law of God that allows us to live for Him: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-13). The believer shows his grace-given love for God by obeying His law. The particular era in which he lives will determine which law he uses as his guide to show his love for God.

### **The Law of the New Covenant Serves as a Guide for Believers in this Era**

I have heard NCT proponents say, “In the Old Covenant era, the Israelites were bound by an external law. Now we are given greater freedom and we are simply to obey the Spirit’s promptings.” I have heard Covenant Theologians say, “If you do not believe that the Decalogue is the rule of life for the believer today you are an antinomian.”<sup>35</sup> Both statements are equally incorrect. The New Covenant Scriptures are filled with commands from Christ and from His representatives (the Apostles) that specifically guide believers in how to show their love for God. In his first epistle John writes: “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3). Notice, John does not say that love for God is to obey the “impressions” or “inner promptings” that the Spirit gives you. God’s commands are clear and unambiguous in the pages of Scripture. We are commanded to be joyful, to pray, and to give thanks (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). We are commanded to obey governmental authorities (Romans 13:1-5), to flee from sexual immorality (I Corinthians 6:18), and to gather together as believers and encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). The list could go on and on. The fact that there is objective law—different than the Ten Commandments, but clear written commands of God for the New Covenant era—is beyond question. These commands serve as the law that the believer loves and, as the Spirit works in him, he is able to obey with increasing consistency.

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<sup>35</sup> An antinomian is one who is against law. He believes that Christians are not bound by any law at all. See chapter 9.

## Chapter 12

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### Do You Need To Preach Law To Lead People To Christ?

Covenant Theologians often say that in presenting the gospel we need to preach the law because it is the law that drives us to Christ. New Covenant Theologians agree with Covenant Theologians that the condemning aspect of law must be explained in order for someone even to understand the gospel. But we do have two points of disagreement. First, we disagree about *which law* should be “preached” (explained and applied). Covenant Theology believes that the Ten Commandments are what we should present to sinners and NCT disagrees with this. Second, the proof-text that most Covenant Theologians use for the idea that the law must be preached in order to drive people to Christ is Galatians 3:24. We believe this is a misreading of that text. Let me expand on these points.

#### **A. The Main Area of Agreement: *The Gospel Cannot Be Understood Without Law***

The gospel is the “good news” that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners. That immediately makes us ask the question, “What does He save people from?” The answer is, “Jesus saves us from the wrath of God by taking the wrath that we deserve upon Himself.” The question must then be raised, “Why does God believe that we deserve wrath?” The answer is “Because people have sinned against Him.” This forces us back a step further to ask, “What is sin?” The answer is, “Sin is breaking God’s law” (1 John 3:4). Therefore, the good news is that through Jesus Christ we have a way to be saved from God’s

wrath, which we deserve because we broke His law. Therefore, for anyone to truly understand the gospel he must understand God's law and its relationship to him. We link arms in solid agreement about this matter, which is at the heart of the gospel, with our brothers who hold to Covenant Theology.

**B. Disagreement #1: *Which Law?***

Which law should be presented to people today in order to show them that they have disobeyed God and need a savior? Covenant Theologians say that we should present the "moral law," which they identify as the Ten Commandments. NCT says that the only law that is binding or authoritative on all people who live in the New Covenant era (Pentecost to the second coming) is the Law of Christ, which are the commands of Christ and His representatives that are found in the teaching passages of the New Testament.<sup>36</sup> NCT understands the Scriptures to teach that the Old Covenant, the core of which is the Mosaic Law, is null and void (Hebrews 8:13). Thus, rather than showing an unbeliever his sin by pointing him to the Ten Commandments, it would be more biblical to point him to Ephesians 4:25-32 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 for a list of some specific commandments, or to point him to 1 Corinthians 10:31 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 for commandments that are more broad and general. But there are hundreds of texts in the New Testament in which God gives us commands about how we must live. Those texts make up what Paul calls the Law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21).

**C. Disagreement #2: *Understanding Galatians 3:24***

A second area of disagreement is the use of Galatians 3:24 by Covenant Theologians to explain the use of the Ten Commandments to drive people to Christ. Here is the verse in question: "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." An example of this CT practice is found in the recent work of contemporary Covenant Theologian Robert Reymond:

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<sup>36</sup> Many people say that Matthew 22:37-40 should be used to define the Law of Christ. This text is actually the core of all law in any era. In the Old Covenant era a believer expressed his love for God and neighbor according to the specific laws of the Mosaic Covenant. The way believers in the New Covenant era express their love for God and neighbor is somewhat different than the Old Covenant believer and is defined by the teaching passages in the New Testament.

This use of the law (Mosaic Law) for Christian ethics has come to be referred to as the 'third use of the law,' the other two uses being, first, its moral standards which are to serve as the rule of all true civil righteousness, and second, its 'tutorial' work of convicting sinners, through the agency of the Holy Spirit of their sins and thus driving them to Christ that they may be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24).<sup>37</sup>

Reymond uses Galatians 3:24 to say that we should apply the Mosaic Law to the hearts of unbelievers today in the New Covenant era. The problem with Reymond's use of this text is that Galatians 3:24 is not a text about *individual experience* in which the Mosaic Law is used in the life of an unbeliever to cause him to see his need of a savior. Rather, it is a text that is referring to *two historical time periods*.

Let's examine the verse in its context. The argument in the book of Galatians in its most basic form is that salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone. If you add anything to that formula you are preaching or believing another gospel, and you are still under God's wrath. In chapter 3, Paul begins a salvation historical argument in which he contrasts promise and law. In Galatians 3:22-25 we find the continuation of an historical argument in which Paul contrasts the age of law with the age of faith. Paul has been arguing that the law or the Mosaic Covenant, which is based on earning your acceptance with God by obedience to His law (Galatians 3:10), cannot nullify or make void the Abrahamic promise, which is unconditional. Paul argues that the reason why the law cannot nullify the promise is because the promise came before the law. This is important because it prepares us for Paul's argument later in the passage about the time periods of "law" and "faith." The Mosaic Law was used in the lives of the unbelieving Israelites to stir up their desire to sin and to increase their guilt (Galatians 3:19, Romans 5:20, and Romans 7:5). That was the primary function of the Mosaic Law (2 Corinthians 3:4-18).

Paul continues his argument in the book of Galatians:

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998) p. 771.

faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (3:22-25).

When did faith come? Faith did not come during the period of law. Faith came and was “revealed” after the period of the law and we know that this is referring to the time of Christ and His work on the cross. The law (Mosaic Covenant) was put in charge 430 years after the promise (Abrahamic Covenant). It stayed in charge and held people prisoner until faith was revealed. Paul puts this more plainly in Romans 3:21-22 where he writes: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” The opening words “but now” tip us off to the fact that Paul is telling us about something that is new, at least in some limited way. Jesus Christ and His work on the cross, which is called the New Covenant in Hebrews 10:8-14, inaugurated the age of faith. Clearly, according to these verses, there was a time of law that preceded that (and the context demands that this period was the Old Covenant era). Galatians 3:17 tells us that the law came 430 years after the promise. That is, the covenant that was given to Moses and the Israelites was given 430 years after God made His covenant with Abraham. Paul is telling the Galatians that to place themselves back under the Mosaic Law is to misunderstand the Scriptures and to go backward in redemptive history. Instead of doing such a foolish thing they should understand that the Mosaic Law had a purpose, which was to increase sin (Galatians 3:21, Romans 5:20) and not to save. It was that law covenant that “led” historically to the time of Christ, which is the time of faith.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, it is better not to use this text as a proof-text for using the Mosaic Law to lead individual people to Christ. The text that we would use to support the statement that it is necessary to teach about the condemning aspects of the law that you are under (which is the law of Christ for all those living between the ascension and the second coming) in order to drive the unbeliever to Christ is Romans 6:23a “For the wages of sin is death.”

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<sup>38</sup> It is called the time of faith because from the ascension to the second coming is when God is going to save the most of His elect. Before that time, only a tiny remnant of people were saved (Romans 9:27, 11:1-7).

## Chapter 13

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### Was The Mosaic Law Replaced When Jesus Gave The Sermon On The Mount?

The short answer to this question is this: The law of Christ became binding on believers when the Old Covenant was nailed to the cross and the New Covenant was cut in the blood of Christ. Until that time, believers under the Old Covenant were still bound to obey the laws of that Covenant. But there are some important Scriptures to consider in order to get a handle on what God's Word clearly says about this issue.

The passage that is the storm center of the debate about "law" is found near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19).

#### **What Does it Mean to "Fulfill" the Law and the Prophets?**

Jesus spoke these words in His Sermon on the Mount which was during the swing period, the time in which He was living under the Old Covenant, while announcing and teaching about the New Covenant. Paul tells us about this swing period in which Jesus lived in the book of Galatians: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law" (Galatians 4:4). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is giving a tiny "sneak preview" of the New Covenant

while making it clear that it has not yet begun. Although there are more than two covenants in Scripture, God's plan of salvation can effectively be described with reference to two major covenants—the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (Galatians 4:21-31, Hebrews 8:7-13). The law of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, is inseparably tied to the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 3:21-25). When the Old Covenant had fulfilled its purpose, the Law of that covenant *and* the covenant itself came to an end: “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (Galatians 3:23-25). In addition to the Mosaic Law, the institutions like the tabernacle/temple, the priesthood, and the animal sacrifices also came to an end when the Old Covenant came to an end. All of these institutions pointed to the person and work of Jesus Christ and they ceased to be obligatory when Jesus' work on the cross was finished:

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 golden altar of incense and 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, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. 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, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—*external regulations applying until the time of the new order* (Hebrews 9:1-10).

The Old Covenant and its institutions only illustrated what the New Covenant and the work of Jesus Christ actually accomplished:

The law is 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. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4; cf. Hebrews 8:7-13, Hebrews 7:11-25).

Therefore, what Christ means when He says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” is that He is the eschatological culmination of the entire plan of God. That is, Christ is saying he came to fulfill the goal of God’s work throughout history. The Law and the Prophets (the entire Old Testament) are a record of God’s unfolding plan that finally culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come to turn all of God’s preparatory work on its ear and to make it utterly meaningless. He came to bring God’s plan to its proper destination—His person and work. This is a central theme in the book of Matthew and that is why you see the word “fulfill” (*pleroo*) used 16 times (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35, 48; 21:4; 23:32; 26:54, 56; 27:9), only two of which do not have direct reference to Christ and His work (13:48 and 23:32).

**When is “Everything Accomplished”?**

This is crucial because properly interpreting this phrase will tell us when the Law of Moses is no longer binding on believers and when the Law of Christ becomes our rule of life. This can be tricky because in Matthew 5:17-19, Christ clearly says that every detail of the Law of Moses is binding “until everything is accomplished.” There are two options that make sense of this phrase:

**Option #1: Everything is Accomplished at the Second Coming**

This option says that the Mosaic Law, the law of the Old Covenant, continues until the second coming of Jesus Christ. This view is held by many Theonomists and (in a modified manner) by many

Covenant Theologians.<sup>39</sup> It seems to me that this option cannot be true because of other Scriptures that are clearly in direct conflict with it. The following Scriptures clearly tell us that the Mosaic Law has been changed or abolished to some degree in the New Covenant era:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).

God has unquestionably changed or abolished many parts of the Mosaic Law already. Not only have the laws pertaining to food and to animal sacrifices been changed, but Scripture clearly says that the Old Covenant Law has been changed because that law would not allow for a new priesthood in the order of Melchizedek:

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? 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, 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 (Hebrews 7:11-16).

If “until heaven and earth disappear” is the main focus of when the Mosaic Law is no longer binding on God’s people, then it necessarily means that *every last detail* of the Mosaic Law is still in force (from the Sabbath laws, to laws governing animal sacrifice, to laws about

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<sup>39</sup> Theonomists and Covenant Theologians both point to these verses to say that that all or some part of the Mosaic Law is still binding on Christians today. Covenant Theologians typically divide the Mosaic Law into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories. Then they say that Christ has fulfilled the civil and ceremonial elements of the Mosaic Law but not the moral laws. I don’t believe that there is a biblical basis for dividing the Mosaic Law into different categories of laws. Also, laws that they categorize as civil and ceremonial certainly qualify as “the smallest letter” and “the least stroke of a pen.” It seems to me that if a Theonomist or Covenant Theologian can say that even one law is abolished or fulfilled now, then they should say that according to this text “everything” actually has been accomplished before the second coming!

gardening) until the second coming. This does not seem like a viable option because it appears to put this text into irreconcilable conflict with the rest of the New Testament.

**Option #2: Everything was Accomplished when Jesus Died and Rose Again**

This option says that Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, has brought to an end the Old Covenant era and has accomplished all that the Old Covenant had revealed in picture form. According to this option, we should understand the verses as the following paraphrase suggests: “Until I accomplish all that I came here to do (live the perfect life, reveal the Father, and die on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of My people), the Old Covenant will remain in full force. In fact, God would sooner wipe out everything than bring the Old Covenant to naught before I have accomplished my mission.” When was His mission accomplished? It was accomplished at the cross. And the results of His mission finally “kick-in” at Pentecost and the gospel begins to go out to the world.

This interpretation seems to make sense out of several verses in Matthew’s Gospel. First, it helps us to understand Matthew 15:19: “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” In light of the above interpretation, Jesus is saying that until He finishes His work, the Old Covenant law is still binding and anyone who breaks the least of the Mosaic Laws: (i.e. “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard” Leviticus 19:27) *and* teaches others to be in such rebellion against God is in big trouble. To disobey the law of the Old Covenant before Jesus went to the cross (that is, “before everything is accomplished”) was to sin against God.

This interpretation also makes sense of Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” The odd thing about this verse is not that Jesus dresses down the Pharisees and law-teachers for their neglect of justice, mercy and faithfulness, but that he told them that they were right to pay attention to the

comprehensive Mosaic tax laws: “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD” (Leviticus 27:30). The New Covenant law of giving is found in 2 Corinthians 9:6, “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” The rule of New Covenant giving is this: Your love for Christ compels you to give. There is no mandated amount. Matthew 23:23 records Jesus’ words to the Pharisees and law-teachers *before His work on the cross* and therefore the Mosaic Law was still in full effect.

Let me summarize my answer to this question by showing you how this interpretation of Matthew 5:17-19 makes sense of the apparent conflict between Matthew 5:17, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” and Ephesians 2:14-15, “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, *by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations*. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.” Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets and yet he does abolish the law with its commandments and regulations.

This interpretation leads us to the conclusion, as stated earlier, that Jesus did not come to turn all of God’s preparatory work (the law and the prophets) on its ear and to make it utterly meaningless. In addition, the Mosaic Law was still in effect throughout Jesus’ ministry and He even taught that people must obey the minute details of the Mosaic Law. In both senses, Jesus *did not* come to abolish the law and the prophets. But His work on the cross did bring the *purpose* of the Mosaic Covenant to an end. Also, when Jesus died on the cross and inaugurated the New Covenant in His blood, he brought the binding nature of the Law of the Old Covenant to an end and put the Law of the New Covenant into effect. In these ways, Jesus *did* “abolish the law with its commandments and regulations.”

## Chapter 14

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### Why Does Paul Quote The Fifth Commandment In Ephesians 6?

This is one of those passages that at first glance makes any claim that the Ten Commandments are not in force today seem clearly out of step with Scripture. But I want to encourage you to take a second glance. I think you will find that all is not as it seems. Let's look at the passage in question:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1-3).

This is a very hard passage to understand the use of the Old Testament in the New. What makes it so difficult is that the commandment and the promise are just thrown out there without further comment. It seems impossible to be dogmatic about one's interpretation of this verse because Paul spends no ink interpreting it. But I do believe that we can find reasonable interpretive limits and we can also come up with a persuasive understanding as to how Paul might be using this Old Covenant commandment and promise in the New Covenant era.

#### **What It Cannot Mean**

Sometimes it is good, after a cursory reading of the text, to begin by asking what the text cannot mean. Consider 1 John 2:2 as an example: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also

for the sins of the whole world.” If you have read your Bible at all you know that there are scores of passages that tell us that there are many who reject Jesus and are punished for their sins. This passage cannot mean that Jesus was punished for the sins of every last person in the world because then everyone would go to heaven, since they cannot be punished again for a sin that has already been dealt with. Although it would be a wonderful thing if God would reconcile everyone to Himself, that interpretation of 1 John 2:2 clearly contradicts much of Scripture, even other passages in 1 John (i.e. 5:11-13). Therefore, 1 John 2:2 cannot mean everyone’s sin is atoned for.<sup>40</sup> Now let’s turn our attention to Ephesians 6:1-3.

A cursory reading of Ephesians 6:1-3 reveals several interpretations that cannot be right, given what God clearly reveals in the rest of Scripture.

### Interpretation #1

**The promise that came with the fifth commandment simply meant a longer life.**

The penalty for disobedience to one’s parents was death in the Old Covenant era: “Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death...” Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (Exodus 21:15, 17). Therefore, it is possible that all the promise meant in the Old Covenant era was that if one obeys his parents he would live a “long life” since he wouldn’t immediately be put to death. Long life would then simply mean “longer life.” Although this might have been the meaning in the Old Covenant era, it seems to be a somewhat pointless “blessing” to mention if that’s all that it was. But how would such a promise or blessing apply in a Christian context when there is no death penalty enforced by the church? Wouldn’t the disobedient child who is not put to death live a “long life” just like the obedient child? This interpretation just doesn’t seem to work.

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<sup>40</sup> Given theological as well as exegetical considerations that are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is better to understand this verse to be referring to Jesus as the sacrificial offering given not for Jews only but also for all other kinds of people. Jesus is not only the Savior of the Jews but He is the atoning sacrifice for those whom God calls to repentance and faith from every tribe, nation, and language of the world (Revelation 5:9).

### Interpretation #2

Paul is saying that if children obey their parents they are guaranteed by the sure promise of God that they will live a long life *in Palestine*.

This promise for obedient children in its Old Covenant context referred to the Promised Land, which is modern day Palestine. Consider the two Old Testament texts that contain the promise: “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 5:16) and “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). Although it is true that the Old Covenant context of “land” was Promised Land, this cannot possibly be what Paul meant. Nowhere else in the New Testament is there even a hint that obedient children will inherit the physical land of Palestine. Besides, many obedient children, even Christian children, have lived and died outside the geographical boundaries of Palestine. Therefore, the meaning of “land/earth”<sup>41</sup> must be interpreted differently in the book of Ephesians than in the Old Testament. Most modern English translations choose the word “earth” rather than “land” (even though the word underlying the verse is the same in the Old Testament and in the New Testament) because the translators understand that there is a move from Israel to the world—from God working almost exclusively with Israel to pouring out His mercy on people from every nation. Although I don’t think this New Testament translation of this particular verse is satisfactory, at least the translators recognized that there was a theological problem that needed to be addressed.

### Interpretation #3

**All obedient children, regardless of their spiritual state, are promised that they will live a long life (60 to 100 years?) here on earth.**

This is the general direction Tedd Tripp takes in his understanding of these verses in his excellent and popular book, *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*. In his book, Tripp writes about “the circle of blessing” in which parents are to help their children live by teaching them to honor and

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<sup>41</sup> The word for “land/earth” in Hebrew is *eretz* and in Greek it is *ges*. Paul does **not** use a different word when he quotes the commandment/promise in Ephesians.

obey them. Ephesians 6:1-3 is used to support this idea. The circle of blessing theory basically says that when children are “obedient,” whether they are believers or not, they are blessed by God in some sense:

It is imperative that children learn to honor and obey. It will go well with them. Their obedience is not secured so you can be obeyed for your sake. You must be obeyed for their sakes! They are the direct beneficiaries of honoring and obeying Mom and Dad. The disobedient child has moved outside the place of covenant blessing. The parent must quickly restore the child to proper relationship with God and the parent (135).<sup>42</sup>

The function of the rod and communication is rescue. You must move your child from the peril of rebellion and disobedience into the circle of safety. The child has not just disobeyed Mommy or Daddy. He has disobeyed God. He has made himself liable to the discipline and correction God has appointed for disobedient children. The function of discipline is to restore him to the safety and protection of the circle (136).<sup>43</sup>

As comforting and attractive as this understanding of Ephesians 6:1-3 might be for those of us with unbelieving children, it doesn't seem to be a legitimate interpretive option. Let me explain why. If you follow through with the “circle of blessing” interpretation, this would mean that if your unbelieving child is characterized by obedience to you, then he is *guaranteed* no fatal car accidents, no terminal diseases early in life, or any other unfortunate circumstance that would end his life before a ripe old age. This would make it a one-of-a-kind promise that seems out of step with the concerns of the rest of the New Testament Scriptures, which is not for the physical safety of believers or unbelievers. In addition, my experience does not fall in line with this interpretation. I have known unbelieving children that were characterized by obedience to their parents that have died early in life. I would imagine most people could say the same.

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<sup>42</sup> Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 135.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

#### Interpretation #4

The promise is that *all obedient believing children* are guaranteed a long life here on earth.

The expectation in the rest of Scripture is that believers will be frequently persecuted and killed. It can be a badge of faithfulness and honor to be killed for Christ's sake. If your obedient Christian child goes off to the deepest darkest jungles of Africa or the war torn Middle-East to share the gospel with a lost world, is God actually guaranteeing that such a child will not be killed at the hands of unbelievers, disease, or hunger at a young age? All things are possible with God, but again this option seems so out of step with the rest of Scripture that it should make us search for other interpretive options.

#### A Bland Possibility

I usually eat the same thing every morning—a bowl of oatmeal. But I always add things to it like raisins or bananas, and cinnamon. I could eat it without those things that make it taste good, but I don't because I'm not a fan of bland food. Well, unlike my choice of breakfast foods, I don't get to simply pick and choose what I "want" when it comes to biblical interpretation. Therefore, I must acknowledge that it is possible that Paul is simply making a passing remark that this commandment had a promise attached, not intending to take it any further. It is also possible that the content of the promise does not have any significance to the command for believers now at all. Paul might have emphasized it simply to show the seriousness of obeying this particular command apart from all the other commands. He might be saying, "Children, you must obey your parents. There is a command in the Old Covenant that says just that. The other commandments were important, but this one had a promise attached to it, making it even more important." This is a possible interpretive option. I do not think it is the most persuasive, given the direction Paul and other authors of Scripture often take Old Covenant texts and concepts, but we must acknowledge it as a possibility.

#### An Interpretation That Reflects the Hermeneutic of NCT

##### Who Are the Recipients of the Command/Promise?

Now that we have eliminated (or at least kept at arms length) some interpretations, we need to dig a bit deeper to consider what I think is

the most persuasive interpretation of Ephesians 6:1-3. To do this, we first have to consider the context. Who is the audience? The verses we have chosen to interpret are in the midst of a longer passage concerned with the necessity *for believers* to submit in the various hierarchical relationships in which they find themselves. This issue of submission actually flows out of the passage that precedes the one we are examining. The preceding passage speaks about the need to be filled with the Spirit and what it looks like when one is “filled.” The context begins in Ephesians 5:21. Paul introduces the concept of submission and the different hierarchical relationships in which believers must honor Christ by submitting to those in authority over them. While it is true that everyone is required by God to submit to those in authority over them, these commands are written especially for believers. Notice that in Ephesians 5:21 Paul tells all people to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” And then he tells the wives, “Submit to your husbands *as to the Lord.*” Paul writes about the husband/wife relationship, the parent/child relationship, and the master/slave relationship, in the context of how believers are to behave. You see, the entire context of the passage, beginning in 5:21 and continuing all the way to 6:9, presses us toward interpreting the command/promise in 6:1-3 as a command/promise *for believing* children. Believing children are to obey their parents “in the Lord,” just as believing wives are to submit to their husbands “as to the Lord.” Unbelieving children and unbelieving wives simply need to repent and believe. In the New Covenant era, unbelievers receive no promises of reward from God for their outward obedience when their unbelieving hearts are in rebellion against God.

### **Long Life in the Land**

So, what shall we do with the promise of “long life in the land”? It is clear that the Old Testament context is unequivocally referring to Palestine. If we look at the book of Hebrews, we find that entering the land is equivalent to entering salvation and heaven. The author of Hebrews warns a particular group of Christians with Jewish backgrounds to persevere in trusting in Christ. They were turning back to the Mosaic Law and the worship of angels to guarantee their acceptance with God. The author uses the Israelites of the Exodus generation as examples of unbelievers who did not receive salvation. The evidence that they did not receive salvation is that they did not enter God’s “rest,” that is the Promised Land:

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief (Hebrews 3:14-19).

But the warning that the author of Hebrews is giving the Hebrew Christians is not: “If you don’t persevere, then you won’t be able to take a tour of the holy land!” The author is warning them that if they do not persevere in loving Jesus to the end, then they will not enter God’s salvation rest, which is both a present reality and a future promise that has nothing to do with earthly geography. The author of Hebrews makes this even clearer in chapter 4:

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:6-11).

The author of Hebrews moves effortlessly from the types and shadows of the physical Promised Land and the Old Testament Sabbath to the fulfillment, which is God’s perfect salvation. Is Paul doing the same thing in the book of Ephesians? It is my opinion that Paul has the same hermeneutic as the author of the book of Hebrews. When he references the promise of long life in the land, he sees the types and shadows giving way to the fulfillment—God’s eternal salvation.

### Conclusion

Although at first glance Ephesians 6:1-3 seems like a great argument for the continuing and commanding authority of the Decalogue in the life of the believer today, on closer examination we find that it cannot simply be a reiteration of the fifth commandment

with a promise. Since Paul does not spend any time telling us how he is using the command/promise, I cannot be dogmatic about my interpretation of the passage. We must be honest and admit that there are some Scriptures where it seems best to say that we can only be sure of what it does *not* mean. We can only give our best guess as to what it does mean. Ephesians 6:1-3 is such a passage. But I think that by taking into account how Paul and other authors of the New Testament view the Law of Moses and the whole Old Covenant system (the shadows that pointed to the reality found in Christ and the New Covenant), we arrived at a persuasive interpretive option for Ephesians 6:1-3. Children who profess to have Jesus Christ as their Lord must show evidence that their profession of faith is genuine by obeying their parents. If they persevere in this they can be secure that they really are believers and will spend eternity with the God they love.

### Answering Objections

**Objection:** This answer makes salvation based upon works—obedience to parents.

**Answer:** It is easy to see why one might have that initial objection, but a second glance at the interpretation proposed here will clearly show that this interpretation does not base salvation on works. Allow me to explain. I believe Paul is looking at salvation from the point of view of the *evidence* of saving faith. Just as in the book of Hebrews salvation is conditioned upon perseverance, so also in Paul's letters salvation is often clearly conditioned upon perseverance in obedience. Consider the following two texts:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (Hebrews 3:12-14).

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel (Colossians 1:21-23).

These texts say that you only “share in Christ” if you persevere in obedience to the end. This is not salvation by works, but rather it is referring to the “life” evidence that you are saved. No one can see that you have your sins forgiven. But true faith includes both forgiveness of sin and a work of the Spirit that pushes the believer on to love Jesus more than sin until he dies, and *this* can be seen. Therefore I could paraphrase the command/promise in Ephesians 6:1-3 as follows: “If you are a child who professes to know Christ, then you must obey your parents. If you do, then you give evidence that you will be a recipient of God’s sure promise of eternal salvation.”

**Objection:** You are using the book of Hebrews to interpret the book of Ephesians. Just because the author of the book of Hebrews refers to certain aspects of the Law of Moses (Sabbath and Land) in the manner of picture and fulfillment, this does not mean that Paul necessarily does the same thing.

**Answer:** It is true that if I were to rely solely on the book of Hebrews for my interpretation of Paul’s reference to the Mosaic Law, I would be on shaky ground. Hebrews is the most explicit in its picture/fulfillment interpretation of much of the Old Covenant. According to the author of Hebrews, the Old Covenant Sabbath commandments and land promises are fulfilled in the spiritual salvation found in Christ. In addition, the earthly tabernacle and all of the priestly machinations are simply an illustration of what was to come in the New Covenant through Christ:

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 golden altar of incense and 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, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. 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, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order (Hebrews 9:1-10).

But Paul is in perfect concert with the author of the book of Hebrews. He also sees that the Old Covenant has passed away and its trappings as mere shadows of what was to come. Consider the following passage:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.** These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Colossians 2:13-17).

Paul is viewing the cross-work of Christ as a definitive event that moves us from the age of shadow to the age of reality. Because the written code and its regulations have been nailed to the cross, not only are we declared innocent in the court of heaven, but the Old Covenant law of God (specifically regarding food, religious festivals and Sabbath days in this passage) gives way to Jesus Christ—the One to whom it always pointed. Paul's understanding of the Old Covenant was no different than the author of the book of Hebrews.

## Chapter 15

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### Is The Law Of Christ A Higher Standard Than The Mosaic Law?

I would like to consider the question above as it relates to church discipline. If the requirements of the New Covenant are a greater or higher law than those of the Old Covenant, then does church discipline in the New Covenant era also reflect that higher standard? It is important to note at the outset that although expulsion from Old Covenant Israel is related to church discipline, the two practices are not identical because of the radical differences in the spiritual states of both groups of people and the purposes behind the practices. NCT does not view Old Covenant Israel as the church. We make a distinction between Old Covenant Israel and the church. Old Covenant Israel was made up primarily of unbelievers. They were the picture of the true people of God, but they were not the real thing. The church, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles, is the true God-loving people of God. This is important because although there are some similarities between the divinely mandated practices of Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant church, the differences between the Old Covenant and New Covenant practices are vast. For example, Old Covenant Israel was mandated to make sacrifices to gain forgiveness from God. God tells his New Covenant church to trust in the one sacrifice of Christ to gain forgiveness from God. Although there are similarities, the differences are so substantial that we must consider the two practices to be of totally different natures (as different as a picture of something is to the thing itself). The sacrifices were quite different (bulls and goats vs. Jesus Christ the Son of God). The result of the respective sacrifices were quite

different as well (reminding of sin and remaining guilt vs. being forgiven of sin and being reconciled to God):

The law is 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. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Hebrews 10:1-4).

Let's set the major texts in front of us as we begin to consider the contrast between Old Covenant "expulsion" and New Covenant church discipline. Matthew's Gospel contains the primary passage on church discipline in the New Covenant era:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:15-20).

The book of Deuteronomy contains one of the primary passages in the Old Testament explaining expulsion from the people of Israel. This passage is quoted in the New Testament in relation to church discipline:

Do not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep that has any defect or flaw in it, for that would be detestable to him. If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the LORD gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God in violation of his covenant, and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars of the sky, and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of

only one witness. The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you (Deuteronomy 17:1-7).

Paul's exhortation to practice church discipline in his first letter to the Corinthians ties the Old Covenant practice and the New Covenant practice together by quoting Deuteronomy 17:7:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

There are several differences between the Old Covenant practice of expulsion from Israel and New Covenant church discipline. I would like to highlight just two of them. First, when an Israelite was expelled for idolatry, he was killed. In church discipline in the New Covenant era he is left alive but all relationship and intimacy with that person is severed, and he is no longer considered to be one of God's people. This difference is of great significance as we consider Paul's quotation of Deuteronomy 17:7 in 1 Corinthians 5. His quotation necessitates that we acknowledge some relationship between the two practices, but it also clearly tells us that the practices are not identical. In Deuteronomy 17, the means of expulsion is death by stoning. In 1 Corinthians 5, the

means of expulsion is the severing of all relationships between the individuals in a local body of believers and the guilty party.

The second difference you will notice is that when the law-breaker in the Old Covenant is found to be guilty he is not asked to repent and there is no possibility of restoration to the community. In New Covenant church discipline, repentance, and restoration are foundational. These differences are crucial to grasp since they cause us to focus on one of the primary differences between the two “peoples of God.” Entrance into the Old Covenant people of God was almost exclusively by physical birth. Repentance and belief was not necessary to become part of God’s Old Covenant chosen people. Physical birth got you in and rebellion against God leading to the punishment of physical death removed you. Achan is a great example of the Old Covenant practice in action. Achan broke God’s command to not take any of the plunder from cities that the Israelite army had defeated. Everything was to be devoted to destruction but Achan had “itchy fingers” and stole some of the banned goodies and buried them in his tent:

Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, *his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had*, to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.”

*Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them.* Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since (Joshua 7:19-26).

This is an amazing passage that highlights the contrast between Old Covenant expulsion and church discipline. Achan admitted his crime (when finally confronted) and he and his whole family were then stoned

and burned! New Covenant church discipline involves only the individual (not the entire family) and once again the emphasis is on repentance and restoration. Under the New Covenant, repentance and faith (spiritual birth) is the only way to become part of God's people. Professing to believe gets you in; unrepentant rebellion against God (evidence of spiritual deadness leading to the severing of all relationships in the fellowship of believers) removes you. When repentance does occur after the whole process of church discipline has taken place, the New Covenant people of God are commanded to welcome back their brother with open arms. The immoral man who Paul orders the Corinthian church to put out of their fellowship repents and Paul exhorts the Corinthians to extend love to him: "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:6-8).

In summary, it is best not to say that the requirements or penalties of the New Covenant as they pertain to church discipline are *higher* than those for the punishment of "expulsion" in the Old Covenant. The two covenants are drastically different in character and purpose as are Old Covenant Israel and the church. Therefore the practices of expulsion and church discipline are not identical. It is perhaps best to conceive of their relationship as picture and fulfillment or type and anti-type. For example, although the blood of bulls and goats are not the Old Covenant equivalent of the blood of Christ, they are related. The Old Covenant people of God were required to sacrifice bulls and goats (even though we know that these sacrifices did not atone for sin) because it functioned as a reminder and a picture of the need for a sacrifice that truly satisfies the wrath of God for sinners (Hebrews 10:1-4). The sacrifice of Christ on behalf of sinners serves as the fulfillment of that picture. In the same way, Old Covenant expulsion teaches us, in picture form, that God will not tolerate rebellious individuals who claim to know Him to remain in the midst of His holy people. But this picture is only fulfilled through the practice of church discipline in the real people of God in the New Covenant era.



## Chapter 16

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### If We Are No Longer Under The Mosaic Law, Is Bestiality Still A Sin?

The bestiality question comes up quite often when discussing ethics in relation to New Covenant Theology. I suppose we could also discuss if there are laws about sex with all types of inanimate objects. Does the law of Christ have anything to say about sexual behavior toward animals, minerals, and vegetables? Yes it does. The New Covenant Scriptures are quite clear that sex is a holy and wonderful gift from God but it is only permissible within the bonds of marriage and Christians are only free to marry other Christians. Now with these two points in mind I would like to demonstrate how bestiality is clearly a form of immoral sexual behavior that is breaking God's holy law of the New Covenant:

1) Sex outside of marriage is breaking God's law and therefore sinful.

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5).

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4).

2) Marrying a non-Christian is also breaking God's law and therefore sinful.

A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:39).

3) It is almost universally illegal to marry animals, vegetables, fruits, and inanimate objects. Therefore sex with animals would be breaking God's law by disobeying the state, which is sinful.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established (Romans 13:1).

4) Even if the government of your country suddenly allowed marriage between humans and cows or humans and fresh fruit, neither animals, nor vegetables, nor fruits, nor inanimate objects can become Christians. Therefore sex with animals would be breaking God's law, which is sinful.

**Follow up question: Suppose that it were legal in our country for a man to marry his sister. If this were the case, and a man who attended your church wanted to marry his sister, would your church perform the wedding?**

First we need to get our initial shivers and our "yuck, ick, disgusting" first reactions out of the way. Now, let's go back to the beginning. You have Adam and Eve. Eve gives birth to Cain and Abel. Abel is murdered and Cain "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Genesis 4:16). In the very next verse it says, "Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch." Now, who was Cain's wife? Do we need to go back and build a family tree to figure this one out? Cain's wife had to be his sister or his niece. There is really no way around it. The Scriptures do not teach that this was right or wrong. The event is simply recorded in the pages of Scripture. Is God's law against marrying your sister in the Old Covenant one that was always in force and should always stand? We have no mention in the pre-Mosaic Covenant era about such a command being in force and in fact Cain would be *circumstantial evidence* to the contrary. The Mosaic Law prohibits it: "If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, and they have sexual relations, it is a disgrace. They must be cut off before

the eyes of their people. He has dishonored his sister and will be held responsible” (Leviticus 20:17). In the New Covenant Scriptures no mention is made of the impropriety of marrying one's sister. Although the practice is illegal in many countries, which makes it sinful for Christians living in those countries to do (Romans 13:1), it seems that if you and your sister are both believers and you live in a country that deems marriage between siblings to be a lawful practice, then your marriage would be holy in God's sight.



## Chapter 17

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### Why Does 1 Timothy 1:8-11 Seem To Teach About A Proper Use Of The Mosaic Law For Today?

1 Timothy 1:8-11 is a difficult passage at first glance. We read the words "law" and "using it lawfully" and we wonder how on earth we can reconcile it with other passages in the Scriptures we believe clearly state that the Old Covenant and its law are no longer binding on anyone after the establishment of the New Covenant through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. First we need to remember an important hermeneutical principle: Figure out what the purpose of the passage is. Don't go to the passage with a question to be answered, but rather figure out what question the passage is trying to answer or what statement the passage is trying to make. We should not expect 1 Timothy 1:8-11 to tell us which version of God's law believers are to obey this side of Pentecost if that is not the purpose of the passage. Let's look at the passage:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine

that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Timothy 1:3-11).

Notice that the issue in Ephesus, where Timothy was ministering, is that there are false teachers that need to be rebuked. They are into myths and genealogies. They misunderstand and misuse "the law." Paul comes down on these folks pretty hard! Look at the connection between verse 5 and verse 18. It seems that Paul lumps Alexander and Hymenaeus in with these false teachers—these guys are bound for hell if they don't repent! Their misuse of the law must cause some distortion in the gospel. These guys were Judaizers telling folks that the only way to get right with God is through Jesus *plus* obedience to the law. It doesn't matter what law we are talking about at this point. Such a view is heretical, as Paul states so plainly in the book of Galatians: "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Galatians 2:21).

If using the law to get accepted by God is improper, then what is the proper use of the law? Well, as it relates to salvation, the proper use of the law is to show "lawbreakers and rebels" (unbelievers) their sin. Paul tells us this in Romans 7: "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Romans 7:7) and again "Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (Romans 7:13). In the specific context where there are people trying to use the law to earn their acceptance with God, Paul says that the proper use of law is simply to tell unbelievers that they are guilty before God.

Now, which law does Paul believe we should use to show people that they are guilty before God? Should we use the Ten Commandments, the whole Mosaic Law, or just the commands of Christ and the Apostles? This text does not answer that question. If we want to answer that question we need to go to the texts that actually have the purpose of explaining that very thing (Ephesians 2:11-19, 1 Corinthians 9:19-21, Matthew 5:17-48, 2 Corinthians 3:4-18, Ephesians 4:17-32, 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, Matthew 19:4-9, etc.).

There is another question that necessarily arises as we try to understand 1 Timothy 1:8-11 in light of our theology of law. In this passage Paul says that the "proper" use of law is to show unbelievers

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their sin and point them to the savior. Isn't a proper use of law in the New Covenant era also to tell believers how to love God? NCT says (based on the passages I listed in the above paragraph) that the version of law to be used for this purpose is the law of Christ and not the Mosaic Law; but it is also proper to use the law of Christ (God's commandments that apply to us today) to show us how to love God, even though 1 Timothy 1:8-11 doesn't touch on this use of the law.

Paul was addressing a particular situation wherein false teachers were using the law for justification. In that situation Paul says it is entirely wrong. Law, in relation to reconciliation with God, should be used to convict of sin. It should never be used to get accepted by God. In order to be justified or accepted by God you must repent of the sin that the law pointed out and you must turn to Christ and trust in His work on the cross alone to save you. Law plays no part in the grounds of your acceptance. But if we were to grab Paul and sit down with him to have a larger discussion about the law, he would tell us that in the Old Covenant era another proper use of law was to tell believers (the tiny minority in Israel) how to love God (so David says "Oh how I love Your law!"). He would also tell us that in the New Covenant era, the Law of Christ is used both ways: (1) to tell *unbelievers* that they are under God's wrath: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23) and (2) to tell *believers* how to show their love for God: "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:2-4).



## Chapter 18

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### Why Does The Book Of James Seem To Say That The Mosaic Law Is Still Binding On Believers Today?

It is true that at first and sometimes second glance some of what James says about law is difficult to reconcile with other New Testament Scriptures. This difficulty is not because James wrote in the early years of the apostolic era, but because James wrote on a different aspect of the law than Paul did. In the same way, it is difficult to grasp James' view of justification in James 2:14-26 because James is speaking about another topic—how a justified or saved person will necessarily live.

If James believed and wrote in his letter that believers in the New Covenant era are bound by the Mosaic Law or some subset of that law and if Paul believed and wrote that believers were not bound in any sense by the Mosaic Law, then we have a big problem. Either the writers of the New Testament had a unified perspective on law as well as how Scripture fits together or we have a Bible that is not inspired by God. This is simply not an option for those who believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

If I ask the question, "What law does God want Christians to obey today?" and I go to the text of James, hunting for the answer when James is not addressing that question, I am doing James a disservice and making a hermeneutical misstep. Instead, I need to find the *locus classicus* (the main text that directly answers our question or teaches directly on the topic we are inquiring about). Once I establish our *locus classicus*, then I can compare texts that have apparent conflict with our *locus classicus* and consider how I might understand them and harmonize

them. Again, the comparison between Paul and James based on Romans 3:28 and James 2:24 is an appropriate example:

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law (Romans 3:28).

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone (James 2:24).

They seem contrary to one another until we consider which is the *locus classicus* for our particular question. If I ask, "What do I have to do to merit acceptance before God?" I have to go to the *locus classicus* to answer the question, which is Romans 3:21-31. Here the gospel is given and we are told that acceptance with God (justification) is given by faith apart from works of the law. But if my questions are, "What is the nature of saving faith? What does it look like? Can someone 'believe' and still be saved (justified or vindicated before God on the last day) but live like an unbeliever?" then I have to go to James 2:14-26 for my answer since that is the exact question that he is addressing. If I go to Romans 3:21-31 to try to answer the latter questions I will make serious theological errors.

Now let's look at some of the specific passages in James that mention law and consider what I can legitimately learn from them about law. The first passage to look at is James 1:25-27:

But the man who looks intently into **the perfect law that gives freedom**, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

First we need to identify what the phrase "the perfect law that gives freedom" means. It seems that in the context it must basically be the same as the phrase "word of truth" in verses 18-24 that lead up to the phrase in question:

He chose to give us birth through the **word of truth**, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God

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desires Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept **the word** planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to **the word**, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to **the word** but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

You can see that the antecedent to "the perfect law that gives freedom" is clearly broader than the Mosaic Law. Douglas Moo's comment at this point is helpful. He writes:

James' 'law' does not refer to the law of Moses as such, but to the law of Moses as interpreted and supplemented by Christ. Perhaps, then, the addition of the word 'perfect' connotes the law in its eschatological, 'perfected' form, while the qualification 'that gives freedom' refers to the New Covenant promise of the law written on the heart...accompanied by a work of the Spirit enabling obedience to that law for the first time.<sup>44</sup>

This idea of freedom in relation to salvation is found in Ezekiel 36:24-27 and then 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

The next relevant text is James 2:5-13:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the **kingdom** he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the **royal law** found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever **keeps the whole law** and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. **For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder."** If you **do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.** Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by **the law that gives freedom**, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, with the reference to 'kingdom' in verse 5 and 'royal' in verse 8 it is quite possible that James is speaking about the law of the new kingdom given by the king, Jesus, in Matthew 22:36-40:

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 94.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The Mosaic Law defined “your neighbor” as the Jews and those willing to become Jews. But this certainly did not include Canaanites. The New Covenant defines “your neighbor” as whomever you bump up against (Luke 10:25-37). In addition, the specifics of how I am to show love to my neighbor (and how I am to show my love for God) are different under each covenant. Under the Old Covenant one showed love for his neighbor by building a fence on his roof. It was sin not to do this (Deuteronomy 22:8). Under the Old Covenant one showed love for God by wearing clothes made of a single material (no polyester). It was sin to wear mixed threads (Leviticus 19:19). There is a different set of commands in the New Covenant era (with some overlap) that fill in the specifics of how to obey the two greatest commandments today. In the context of James this “royal law” prohibits showing partiality to some who enter the church and discriminating against others. James is arguing that discrimination by race, financial standing, or anything else is sinful. It sounds an awful lot like the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 and very unlike the Old Covenant understanding of one’s Israelite “neighbor.”

If James’ reference to royal law is connected to Matthew 22:36-40, then showing favoritism breaks the essence of the Kingdom law “love your neighbor as yourself”. James’ next point is to show that if you do this you are utterly guilty and condemnable. He makes this argument by quoting two of the Ten Commandments (both are brought over into the law of Christ very clearly in the New Testament teaching passages) and by saying that the law is a unit. That is, if you break one law you break all of them because you are sinning against the lawgiver not just breaking a rule in a cosmic rulebook. But since James does cite two of the Ten Commandments (although not in the order found in the OT), does this mean that James believes that the Ten Commandments are binding on believers today? It is not the purpose of the passage to answer that question. There are other passages that answer that question, like 2 Corinthians 3:1-18. When James uses two of the Ten Commandments, he wants us to understand this: to break one of God's laws is to personally offend God and rebel against His will. In this

**Why Does The Book Of James Seem To Say That The Mosaic Law Is Still  
Binding On Believers Today?**

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passage, James makes sure that we know that it is illegitimate to say, "Well, so what if I show favoritism to the rich...at least God is pleased that I don't sleep around." Do you see how far this text is from addressing the question of whether the Mosaic Law is binding on the Christian this side of Pentecost?

Finally, the last "law" passage in the book of James is found in 4:11-12. It is very familiar territory since we have just covered several similar passages. This passage is about slander:

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against **the law** and judges it. When you judge **the law**, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

The law that is mentioned in these verses is the same law that is referenced in James 1:25 and 2:8. It is a reference to the "love your neighbor" law found in Matthew 23:36-40, which I mentioned previously. In addition, James 4:11-12 certainly could be tied to other exhortations and commands of Christ like Matthew 7:1-4 regarding hypocritical and self-centered judging. There is certainly no necessity to find James 4:11-12 as a reference to the Mosaic Law.

In summary, the purpose of the book of James is not to tell believers which law they are to obey in the New Covenant era. Because of the parallels between the book of James and other New Testament passages, it also seems that James believed that the rule of life for the believer today is no longer the Mosaic Law but the Law of Christ.



## Chapter 19

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### What Is “The Law Written On The Heart”?

This question refers specifically to a phrase in Jeremiah 31:33, which is quoted in Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16. Even though this phrase, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts” is only found in these three places, the concept is found all over the Scriptures. It is perhaps one of the most important concepts in all of Scripture. Since the Bible is not a highbrow book but rather a book for folks of average intelligence like you and me (well, certainly me), the meaning of this incredibly important phrase must be simple or we’re in trouble. The best way I know to describe what the phrase means is as follows:

*The “law written on the heart” is the Old Covenant way of describing the work of the Spirit of God purchased by Christ for every believer. This work of the Spirit causes every believer to love God more than his sin. It begins at the moment of conversion and continues to cause the believer to persevere in loving His Lord more than anything else in this world until his dying breath.*

Although there are many themes in Scripture, what is the most important or main theme? The entire Bible revolves around one main dilemma: Because man is sinful and God is perfectly holy and just, how will man survive? Man is the creature and God is the Creator. Man owes God a life of loyal service and obedience. Instead of loyalty and obedience, man rebels against God and decides to serve himself. It is easier to think of this in terms of politics. God is the all-wise and perfectly just King and men are the subjects in God’s Kingdom.

Although the King has given his subjects every good gift, all men decide to rebel against the great King and set up their own kingdoms, refusing to obey the all-wise King. Man has committed cosmic mutiny. He is guilty of the worst of crimes and will be tried in the court of the great King who is also the great Judge. But there is a second part to this dilemma that is perhaps even worse. All men have bad hearts. Even if God the great King decides to pardon mankind, men cannot be rehabilitated. They are rebellious at their core. How can the perfectly holy and just God live with guilty and totally depraved men?

The New Covenant, which is another way of saying “the work of Christ” solves this two-part cosmic dilemma. Christ stands in the place of God’s chosen people from every tribe, language, people, and nation and is punished for their sins with God’s perfect wrath. These men who had criminal records in the court of heaven get their records wiped clean. In addition to forgiveness of sins, Christ purchases a new heart for every one of God’s elect. That is, Christ purchases a work of the Spirit of God by which He changes every true Christian from a rebel against the great King to a willing subject. God transforms every one of His children from a God-hater to an incurable God-lover.

How does “the law written on the heart” fit into this main theme of all of Scripture? The answer is found in the book of Jeremiah. The phrase “the law written on the heart” comes from Jeremiah 31:33, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.” The context of the book of Jeremiah is important. God speaks through Jeremiah to the people of Judah at a time when God has raised up Babylon to crush them for their unfaithfulness. God has Jeremiah plead with the people of Judah to repent but they don’t listen. He warns them but they ignore him. Finally, God tells them that judgment will certainly come but He will not so utterly destroy them that they will have no future. God, who is always faithful, has decided that He will restore His unfaithful people in the future. Here is an extended section of Jeremiah 31 so we can get a lay of the land regarding the immediate context of the verses:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: 'The LORD bless you, O righteous dwelling, O sacred mountain.' People will live together in Judah and all its towns—farmers and those who move about with their flocks. I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint."

At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me.

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. 28 Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the LORD. "In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge.

"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. 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 broke my covenant, though I was a husband to 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 law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD Almighty is his name: "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." This is what the LORD says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 31:23-37).

The nation of Israel had occupied the Promised Land under the wise leadership of David, the shepherd king. The land was not the problem. David's leadership, with all its warts and flaws, was not the problem. The kings that followed David and the people who followed *those kings were the problem*. They had bad hearts. So, their God-hating and self-loving hearts led them to rebellious living so that they quickly found themselves under God's wrath and in the hands of their enemies. But our kind and compassionate God planned a restoration. As they were on the verge of losing the Promised Land for 70 years in Jeremiah's day, God said that He would again restore them and that the land would again be part of the restoration package. God also promised that new leadership and a restored priesthood and sacrificial system would be part of this grand restoration: "For this is what the Lord says: 'David will

never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offering, to burn grain offerings, and to present sacrifices” (Jeremiah 33:17). But at the heart of this restoration, which makes it truly “new,” is the promise of a new heart. That is one of the primary things that sets this New Covenant apart from the Old Covenant. The people of this New Covenant will be spiritually restored—made into an obedient and faithful people—as they had never been before. These restored people will be a forgiven people who are loved and accepted by God rather than falling under his wrath as Jeremiah’s audience was about to experience.

Now that the stage is set for understanding this passage, let’s look at the verses one by one:

“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” (v. 31).

God says that He will make this New Covenant with physical Israel and Judah. If you read the verses that surround this text as I wrote out above, it is crystal clear that this New Covenant, in its Old Testament context, is promised to the geo-political nation of Israel at some point in the future.

“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 broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD (v. 32).

God is contrasting the New Covenant that he is going to make in the future with the Old Covenant made at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19-24. This New Covenant will be different: “It will not be like...” the Old Covenant that the Israelites broke and then fell under God’s wrath. Imagine how comforting that message would have been to a people who were on the verge of being destroyed because of their rebellion against that previous covenant!

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (v. 33a).

How will the New Covenant “not be like” the Old Covenant? Well, the law that was formerly written on stone tablets and placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a witness against the people will now be put on their minds and written on their hearts. Paul calls the Old Covenant “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone...” (2 Corinthians 3:7). When the unbelieving Israelites were confronted with God’s perfect and holy authority in the Mosaic Law, it simply stirred up their sinful hearts to rebel even more, which only made them guiltier before God. Paul again writes about this painful state of existence in Romans 7:5: “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature (flesh), the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.” This New Covenant will change all of that and bring the people into a relationship with God. Paul writes about this in Romans 7:6: “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”

The vast majority of the people under the Old Covenant did not have a love relationship with God. They had the law on stone tablets witnessing against them when they rebelled against God by breaking that law. But the restored people will be inwardly compelled to obey God’s law because every one of them will know this God:

“I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD (vs. 33b, 34a).

They will not simply have knowledge of who He is, because every Old Covenant Israelite knew God in that sense. They will know God in the sense of actually having an intimate and loving relationship with Him. No one will need to teach the people under the New Covenant to love (or “know”) the Lord. God sent the prophets to the Israelites to do just that. They constantly exhorted, rebuked, and implored the people of Israel to love God. But because of their bad hearts, the Israelites were a people who honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15:8). Jeremiah says that God will change all of that with the New Covenant because God will change their hearts and minds and cause these New Covenant people to love God.

One of the fundamental contrasts between the Old Covenant and this New Covenant that God is introducing through Jeremiah is that the people of the New Covenant will have their sins forgiven!

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (v. 34b,c).

The Old Covenant not only was unable to transform rebellious people confronted by an external law into an obedient people who were internally motivated to love God, but it could not provide a way for people to be accepted by God. Its provision for sin, the sacrificial system, actually could not get the God of heaven and earth to forgive the wickedness of the people of Israel. This is confirmed in the book of Hebrews when God had the author of that book write: "...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4). This news of a New Covenant that could change peoples' hearts, bring them into a relationship with God, and cleanse them of their guilt must have been the most wonderful words that the Israelites facing God's wrath had ever heard!

### A Parallel Passage

Now, you may have noticed that I did not spill a whole lot of ink supporting my interpretation of the law placed in the mind and written on the heart in Jeremiah 31. My argument was primarily from the context wherein the Israelites were historically disobedient to God and therefore God brought in a solution (putting the law on the mind and writing the law on the heart) to their rebellion. One of the reasons I didn't spend a whole lot of time trying to pick apart the verses in question is because there is a parallel passage in Ezekiel that says the same thing in much clearer language. The context is identical to that of Jeremiah. Ezekiel prophesies about the inevitable destruction of Judah by the Babylonians because of the unfaithfulness of the people. But God, through Ezekiel, tells the people that He will restore them:

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 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. You will live in the land

I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake,” declares the Sovereign LORD. “Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, O house of Israel” (Ezekiel 36:24-32).

The audience in this passage is the people of Judah. They are once again promised restoration in the Promised Land—Palestine. If you read chapter 34, you will find that they are promised a new king, a new David. But, as before, a new land and a new king will not be enough to restore a people with evil hearts. So the solution is that God will give them new hearts. Another way of putting it is that God will give them new spirits. Yet another way of saying the same thing is that God will remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh. All this means that God will do a work in them by His Spirit and move them to obey Him (“...move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” v. 27). This is the promise of the New Covenant and the law written on the heart or as the Apostle Paul puts it, “we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Roman 7:6).

Let me tie a ribbon around this issue. When God says “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts” in Jeremiah 31 and again in Hebrews 8 and 10 He is talking about one of the two major dilemmas facing sinful man living in God’s world. God is talking about solving man’s problem: that He is naturally “bent” toward rebelling against the God of heaven and earth. We see in Jeremiah and Ezekiel that this was the dilemma of Israel. No matter how many times God took the people of Israel back after they had sinned, the people would return to their rebellion because they had bad hearts. When God promises to write His laws on the hearts of His people or to put a new spirit in His people and move them to follow His decrees, He means that He will fundamentally change the people so that they love God and seek after His glory more than they love themselves. As I said above, the law written on the heart is the Old Covenant way of describing the work of the Spirit of God purchased by Christ for every believer. This work of the Spirit causes every believer to love God more than his sin. It begins at the moment of conversion and continues to cause the believer

to persevere in loving His Lord more than anything else in this world until his dying breath.

**Answers to Objections**

**Objection:** The restoration promises in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 are to physical Israel and had to do with the land of Palestine. Even the book of Hebrews is a book written specifically to Jewish converts and so it seems that these promises of a New Covenant are primarily for Jews. How can New Covenant Theology say that these promises are now for the church?

**Answer:** It is absolutely essential that we see that the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah that was made to the *picture* of the people of God is actually fulfilled in the *real* people of God (all believers, both Jews and Gentiles) through the work of Christ on the cross. A central theme in Scripture is “God’s chosen people.” In the Old Covenant Scriptures, Israel is that chosen people. But in the New Testament this chosen people concept undergoes some changes. There is a movement from Israel being God’s chosen people to God choosing His people from nations through the blood of Christ:

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9, 10).

God promised the people of Israel that they would be His people *if* they obeyed:

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites (Exodus 19:5, 6).

God’s New Covenant people, the church, are God’s chosen people who He transforms. This is not an “if, then” proposition. God simply makes the church His people:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you

out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10 quoting Exodus 19:6 and Hosea 2:23).

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul refers to the work of Christ as a work that makes Jews and Gentiles into one new group of people, God’s people:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:14-18).

In Hebrews 10, the author of Hebrews writes about the one perfect sacrifice of Christ and contrasts it with the ineffective sacrifices of the Old Covenant priesthood:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:11-14).

We have seen in Revelation 5 and Ephesians 2 that Christ’s sacrifice was made for people from all nations. The author of Hebrews goes on to tell us that Christ’s sacrifice is the fulfillment of the promise in Jeremiah 31:

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more” (Hebrews 10:15-17).

God, through the author of Hebrews, tells us that Jeremiah 31 and the New Covenant is about Christ’s perfect sacrifice for His people. Our God makes it clear in His word that His true people that are part of the New Covenant are from all nations. The Israelites would have read Jeremiah 31 and thought that the New Covenant restoration was

exclusively for them. But when God interprets His own word He tells us that this is simply not the case. Because of the work of Christ, people from all nations that repent and believe can be forgiven of their sins and can worship God:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

It seems that to understand the work of Christ (which is the New Covenant) as applying to ethnic Israel because the Old Covenant context demands it, makes a fundamental mistake in biblical interpretation. The mistake is reading the New Testament through the lens of the Old rather than the other way around.

**Objection:** The law that is referred to in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 is the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses is what God says he will cause His people to obey. How can New Covenant Theology say that the law has changed?

**Answer:** There are two fundamental hermeneutical principles that we need to deal with as we consider this objection. Sometimes people come to Scripture with their questions. This seems like a good idea on the surface but it violates a fundamental rule of hermeneutics. A proper approach is to employ hermeneutical principle #1: *Figure out what the purpose of the passage is.* Don't go to the passage with a question to be answered, but rather figure out what question the passage is trying to answer or what statement the passage is trying to make. If you go to Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, or Hebrews 8 and 10 asking the question, "Which law do Christians need to obey in the New Covenant era?" you will almost certainly misinterpret those passages. In the interpretation of Hebrews 10 above we saw that when Jeremiah 31 is quoted by the author of Hebrews, the New Covenant is really about the work of Christ in contrast with the work of the Old Covenant. Unlike the Old Covenant, the work of Christ or the New Covenant obtains eternal forgiveness and a God-loving heart for every person that is a part of the New Covenant. It has nothing to do with which law Christians are to

obey in the New Covenant era. You must look at another passage that has as its purpose to tell us which law Christians are to obey today.

The second hermeneutical principle we need to consider as we think through this objection concerns how to read the Scriptures. Hermeneutical principle #2 is, *always read the Old Covenant Scriptures through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures*. The objection above is based on reading Jeremiah 31 and allowing that context to drive the interpretation of Hebrews 8 and 10. That approach is reading the New Covenant Scriptures through the lens of the Old Covenant Scriptures. Notice that the objection assumes that the Old Covenant context of the word “law” does not change when the author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31. I have just shown how the Old Covenant context of “Israel” and “Judah” must be reinterpreted to mean the true people of God from all nations because of the New Covenant context. When the people in Jeremiah and Ezekiel’s day heard about the New Covenant to Israel and Judah they would have thought about those who are the physical offspring of Abraham and no one else. But the promise of the New Covenant is for all people who repent and believe, not just Israel and Judah. So also, when we look at the phrase “law written on the heart” we need to look in the other New Covenant Scriptures and ask, “What law does God want believers to obey in the New Covenant era?” rather than simply assuming that the Old Covenant context drives the way it is to be understood in the New Covenant Scriptures. It is true that when God promises to give His people new hearts in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and to move His people to follow His decrees and keep His laws, the Old Covenant audience would clearly have understood the reference to law to refer to all 613 of the Mosaic laws (not simply the Ten Commandments), although even in that context the purpose of the passage was not to tell you the content of the law but to describe a new motivation to obey that God would give His people. Now in the New Covenant the promise is fulfilled when God makes a new people cleansed by the blood of Christ and changed by the blood bought work of the Spirit. He makes His people into God-lovers who desire to obey God. What does God ask His Spirit-motivated people to do in the New Covenant era or what law should we obey? The passage doesn’t tell us, and the Old Covenant context of the word “law” does not give us any answers. To answer the question we need to go to passages that address this question.



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SECTION **4**

*Questions  
About*

**THE SABBATH**



## Chapter 20

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### What Do New Covenant Theologians Believe About The Sabbath And The Lord's Day?

There are three major points by which the NCT position on the Sabbath can be summarized:

1. The Old Covenant has passed away and none of the commands of the Mosaic Law are binding on believers today, including the command to keep the Sabbath holy.
2. There is not a "1 in 7 pattern" of rest and work that believers in the New Covenant era are obligated to follow because there is no such command in Scripture.
3. Although the early church may have regularly met on Sundays (the first day of the week) as a way of commemorating the resurrection, there is no command to meet on that day. In addition, early church patterns are not binding on believers. Therefore God's people are free to gather any day or days of the week that they so choose to gather.

Allow me to explain and clarify each of the points above:

- 1. The Old Covenant has passed away and none of the commands of the Mosaic Law are binding on believers today, including the command to keep the Sabbath holy.**

It is easier to understand the perspective of New Covenant Theology on biblical law if you think in terms of covenants rather than abstracting from the Old Covenant the Ten Commandments or the Sabbath. Only then can we consider the Ten Commandments and the Sabbath.

First, the book of Hebrews clearly states that the Old Covenant has been replaced by the New Covenant and therefore the whole Old Covenant is obsolete:

But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises...By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Hebrews 8:6, 13).

It seems to me that in light of these verses above it would be really hard to make the argument that any part of the Old Covenant is still binding. God, through the author of Hebrews, says that the entire Old Covenant has been replaced and is now obsolete. You see, if the Old Covenant as a unit is no longer in force and if the Ten Commandments are part of that covenant, then it seems that the Ten Commandments are necessarily null and void as well.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the Old Testament says the Ten Commandments are the *essence* or summary of the Old Covenant. Therefore, it is very clear that the Ten Commandments, including the Sabbath are no longer binding on believers in the New Covenant era. The Old Covenant Scriptures themselves tell us that the Ten Commandments are inextricably tied to the Old Covenant and in fact can be used as a catch-phrase for the covenant as a whole because they are so central to it.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets **the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments** (Exodus 34:27-28).

Notice that the Ten Commandments are called “the words of the covenant.” Which covenant? Well, the context limits our options to one

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<sup>45</sup> Covenant Theologians do not believe that the Old Covenant is in force today, but rather they see the Ten Commandments and certain principles from the Old Covenant as being eternally in force.

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covenant—the Old Covenant. The Ten Commandments were written on the stone tablets and placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a testimony of God's covenantal requirements of His people. Notice the same identification of the Ten Commandments with the Old Covenant in the book of Deuteronomy:

He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. And the LORD directed me at that time to teach you the decrees and laws you are to follow in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 4:13-14).

It seems to me that the Ten Commandments are very tightly bound to the Old Covenant based on the Scriptures above. The main point so far is that the Old Covenant has passed away and the Ten Commandments (which include the Sabbath) written on tablets of stone or the tablets of the covenant are a central part of that Old Covenant. This should be enough to make a strong case that the Ten Commandments, and in particular the Sabbath, are not binding on believers today in the New Covenant era. But there is still something lacking in what I have presented so far, and that is a New Testament reference to the Ten Commandments (not just the broader and more inclusive Mosaic or Old Covenant) passing away.

The New Testament passage that says with the most clarity that the Ten Commandments have passed away is 2 Corinthians 3. In this passage the Apostle Paul is trying to convince the Corinthians that his ministry is legitimate. Paul bases its legitimacy on the fact that his ministry actually causes people to turn from sin and follow God. He contrasts his powerful life/heart-transforming New Covenant ministry with the ministry of the Old Covenant:

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 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 3:3-6).

Notice the wording that Paul uses as he defends his ministry. He says that his ministry is of the Spirit, not of the letter. It is not a ministry where God writes on “tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” What was written on those tablets of stone? The Ten Commandments (the essence of the Old Covenant) were written on those tablets. Do you remember Exodus 34:28? “Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets **the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.**” Paul is contrasting his New Covenant ministry with the ministry of the Old Covenant—particularly the Ten Commandments. Let’s see a bit more:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (2 Corinthians 3:7-11)

As you can see, the entire ministry of the Old Covenant, which can be summarized as a ministry of the letter written on tablets of stone, was a “ministry of death.” The Ten Commandments were the essence of that ministry of death and were inextricably tied to the Old Covenant, which could not get men accepted by God—only condemned. That Old Covenant ministry of death was fading away or really was always pointing toward that which would fulfill it. It was pointing toward the New Covenant ministry of Jesus Christ, who purchases forgiveness of sins and the transforming work of the Spirit for every single one of His chosen people.

Therefore, the Ten Commandments as a unit are tied to the Old Covenant and the ministry of death that could not save people. Grabbing all of them or even just grabbing the Sabbath and saying that it is still binding today is the same, hermeneutically, as grabbing the dietary laws or the laws concerning priesthood and sacrifice and saying

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that these are still binding today.<sup>46</sup> God has made a new people through a New Covenant and he has given them new laws to obey that are not part of the Old Covenant.

Let's turn to the second point about the Sabbath:

### **2. There is not a "1 in 7 pattern" of rest and work that believers in the New Covenant era are obligated to follow because there is no such command in Scripture.**

Many of my brothers who are Covenant Theologians believe that the Sabbath was a command given at creation. They look at Genesis 2:2-3 as the place where God commanded this pattern:

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done (Genesis 2:2-3).

It is clear that God rested on the seventh day and because that was the day that He finished His work, He blessed that day and made it holy. But these verses don't tell us to do anything in particular with the seventh day. What does it mean in this passage for the seventh day to be "holy"? Does it necessarily entail some sort of Sabbath for mankind? It seems to me that the text is silent on the issue. Therefore, we are not able to say this is a command.

So, was the Sabbath something God commanded man to keep from creation? Scripture says that the Sabbath was not even revealed by God until the giving of the Mosaic Covenant:

You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses (Nehemiah 9:13-14).

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<sup>46</sup> Covenant Theologians divide the Mosaic Law into moral, civil and ceremonial laws and consider the moral laws binding but the civil and ceremonial laws as having been fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding on believers today. But I don't believe this understanding is supported by Scripture. Where can we go in Scripture to tell us which laws are moral and which are simply civil and ceremonial? What passage of Scripture tells us that only part of the Old Covenant law passed away when the New Covenant era began? It seems to me that dividing the Mosaic Law into different kinds of laws to arrive at an answer concerning which laws believers must obey today is misguided.

With that said though, it is not as if God's rest on the seventh day had nothing to do with the Sabbath. God's rest at creation *was* one of the reasons for the Israelites to keep the Sabbath:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

The command to keep the Sabbath was also based on God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day (Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

Both versions of the Sabbath commandment are the fourth commandment in the Decalogue. The Israelites were to obey the Sabbath command to rest from work on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day and because God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Both God's rest on the seventh day and His wonderful deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt are important to us today, but the reasons behind God's command for the Israelites are irrelevant as it concerns the authority of the command for us today. What authority does the Sabbath command have over us today? As I explained above, the entire Mosaic Law, including the Ten Commandments, are no longer binding on believers because the Old Covenant in its entirety is null and void and has been replaced by the New Covenant. This commandment in the Decalogue is as applicable to us today as the commandment, "Do not mate different kinds of animals" (Leviticus 19:19), which is also part of the Mosaic Law.

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God's rest on the seventh day in Genesis is mentioned in the New Testament, but only as it relates to our entering into His rest by trusting in Christ alone and not shrinking back in unbelief. It occurs in arguably the single most important teaching passage about the Sabbath in the entire New Testament. That is Hebrews 3:7-4:11. Allow me to set the stage for the passage. After delivering the Israelites out of the hands of Pharaoh, God made certain that they did not enter the promised land of Canaan because of their rebellion. He made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until all of them died without entering the land except for Joshua and Caleb. Our passage in the book of Hebrews picks up the main lines of the story, considering the Exodus generation of the Israelites as an example to warn believers who seem to be turning away from Christ due to hard times:

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest" (Hebrews 3:7-11).

The *loved, chosen, and redeemed* Israelites were not allowed to enter the land, which God referred to as His rest.

We see very clearly in the book of Hebrews that entering the land was simply a physical picture of entering salvation or believing, and resting from reliance on good works to earn God's favor. What the Old Testament account of the Israelites reveals is a people who were unwilling to trust and obey God, resulting in a loss of a physical inheritance. The Holy Spirit then interprets this for us, through the author of the book of Hebrews, as a warning for people refusing to trust in the work of Jesus Christ alone to save them:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (Hebrews 3:12-14).

The immediate audience of the book of Hebrews as well as you and I are warned that if we continue in unbelief as did the Exodus generation, we too will lose our inheritance and we will receive spiritual

condemnation. The Exodus generation becomes the infamous example of unbelief. This becomes alarmingly clear in Hebrews 3:15-4:2:

As has just been said: "Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they are not able to enter, **because of their unbelief**. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

The message of these verses can be paraphrased as follows: "The Israelites of the wilderness generation turned from God and experienced His judgment. They were a disobedient people who lost their inheritance because they were unbelievers. Don't be like them!"

Up to this point, God's rest was a reference to the Promised Land, which the book of Hebrews makes clear was a physical picture of salvation. That quickly changes in the verses that follow:

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest" (Hebrews 4:3-5).

Now God's rest after He finished creating the world is related to the physical rest God offers the Israelites and then shuts them out of because of their disobedience. It is also clearly related to the main topic in the book of Hebrews, which is salvation rest: "We who have believed enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:3). The author goes on to argue that since David, in Psalm 95, called on the Israelites to enter God's rest, then the generation of Israelites under Joshua who actually entered the Promised Land could not truly have entered God's rest:

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his

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voice, do not harden your hearts." For, if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day (Hebrews 4:6-8).

Now, the Israelites did enter their promised rest when you simply read the book of Joshua:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

But the author of Hebrews sees the rest in the Promised Land as only a physical picture of true salvation rest. His point is that Joshua no more gave the Israelites true rest than you or I could satisfy a starving man rest from his hunger with only a picture of food. The author wraps up his argument with perhaps the most revealing verses in the passage concerning the Sabbath:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:9-11).

Although the concept of rest is all through the passage, verse 9 is the only mention of Sabbath. What Sabbath-rest still remains for God's people? It is the Sabbath-rest that has been the topic of the entire passage, salvation rest. How do we enter God's rest? The passage is clear that we enter His rest by persevering in belief. We must trust in the work of Christ alone to save us and never turn away from that no matter how severe the trial becomes. This passage is not about making every effort to enter Palestine or that there still remains a day of rest each week for the people of God. Equally, this passage is not about entering into God's rest by encouraging believers to rest one day out of every seven as God did when He created the world. This passage is about the wonderful fulfillment to which all three of these pictures point—*resting from* living in a works-based relationship with God that leads to condemnation and *resting in* a faith-based relationship with God, which allows sinners to be reconciled to God.

Now let's consider the final point about the Sabbath:

3. Although the early church may have regularly met on Sundays (the first day of the week) as a way of commemorating the resurrection, there is no command to meet on that day. In addition, early church patterns are not binding on believers. Therefore God's people are free to gather any day or days of the week that they so choose to gather.

The expression "The Lord's Day" is found only once in Scripture and that is in Revelation 1:10: "On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." What this expression means must be considered separately from the other expression "the first day of the week" (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), which has also been interpreted by many to refer to the formal and mandated day for the people of God to gather in the New Covenant era. Revelation 1:10 could refer to "Christian Sunday" or it could refer to the day of the Lord's return, which is so frequently mentioned in the Old Testament prophets and has much to do with the content of the visions in the book of Revelation. It is hard to decide between the two. But one thing is for certain—this text has nothing to do with the weekly schedule for the gathering of the church. There is no command in the verse and the verse has nothing to do with the gathering of the body of Christ on a regular basis.

The first day of the week is given somewhat high profile in the New Testament because on that day Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus appeared to the disciples on the first day of the week (John 20:19). The Christians in Ephesus ate together and heard a message from Paul on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Paul instructed the churches to put aside contributions on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2). These verses contain no commands for believers. They record historical snapshots of the early church.

Beyond recognizing the clear biblical fact that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is extremely significant, what should we do about the fact that the first day of the week seemed to be given high profile in the New Testament? Nothing, it seems. Although the early church may have (it also may not have) met on the first day of the week, the early church also did many other things. In Acts 2:46 it says, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Must we

meet together daily? Must we break bread together in our homes? These may be good things to do, but is it something that we are commanded to do? The early church held all of their possessions in common. They were free not to do this, but that is what they chose to do. That was the pattern of the early church. This may be a good thing to do, but is it something that we must do? Paul told Timothy to take some wine for some of his ailments. That was obviously a practice that the Apostle Paul himself endorsed. Once again, it may be a good thing to do, but is it something that we must do in order to truly glorify God with our lives? How do you know which examples to follow?

There is no way to transform examples in Scripture to commands for you and I today without taking a buffet approach to Scripture. By that I mean that you sit before Scripture as you would a large buffet with all kinds of choices. You look at the spread of “examples” before you in Scripture and pick and choose the examples you like and you pass on those examples that don’t look as appetizing to you. We are not commanded which day of the week we need to gather as a body of believers, how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, or to hold our possessions in common or maintain our individual holdings. Therefore, we can rejoice in the freedom that God has given us about these things and use that freedom to be effective in loving and serving His Kingdom. But what we cannot do is make these examples into commands.

To sum it all up, New Covenant Theologians believe in celebrating their Sabbath-rest every moment as they trust in Christ alone to save them rather than earning their acceptance with God by anything they can do. But New Covenant Theology does not believe that there is any command of God that is applicable to believers in the New Covenant era to rest or gather as a body on any particular day of the week.

### **A Practical Application**

The question of whether to gather on a particular day is usually asked either because someone believes that Sunday is the Lord’s Day or the Sabbath, or that the Sunday gathering is a special time of worshipping the Lord that is set apart from other gathering times. But the question is very important for everyone who follows Christ to think through. What if I showed up every week for a Wednesday night Bible study, but never on Sundays? Is it possible to honor the Lord and do that?

Allow me to place before you two contrasting scenarios that might challenge your understanding. Imagine that there is a man desperately

trying to support his family, and his background is such that the only job he can get barely pays the bills and he must work on Sunday morning, so he does. He goes to Wednesday night Bible study without fail and he soaks it up. He is brimming over with questions and experiences of living for Christ. He would love to go to church on Sunday, but he is unable to support his family at this time and do so. Therefore, he embraces his freedom in Christ to gather and be encouraged on Wednesday rather than Sunday.

Now imagine another man who "embraces his freedom in Christ" to gather together whenever he chooses. This man loves life—he loves golfing, sailing, and he is involved in several local organizations that take up much of his time. He goes to gather with the body of Christ on Sunday "religiously." He has done so ever since he was a child. He is there but he never takes notes and doesn't seem to be growing. He tells you often that he can't wait to get out on the golf course or out on the water after church is over. Although he "wants" to come to the Wednesday night study, due to his other commitments with the Kiwanis Club and some local charities, he only makes it to the Wednesday night gathering about once every 6 to 8 weeks and he tends to fall asleep.

Which man is obeying Hebrews 10:24-25? As you consider your answer, keep in mind that if the first man were in a body of believers in which you were one of the pastors and you held to some form of Christian Sabbath or even believed that the "Lord's Day" was the mandated day for gathering, then you would have no choice but to call that man to repent. If he did not, you would ultimately have to take him through the steps of church discipline. Although I wouldn't agree with this understanding of that doctrine, I would applaud you for following through with what you believe. God takes sin seriously and we should too. Sin is sin no matter how difficult the situation might be and if you are convinced that the Scriptures clearly teach that there is a Christian Sabbath, you must be faithful and follow through as you shepherd those entrusted to you. It seems to me that once you are convinced of the NCT perspective on Sabbath and Lord's Day, then you simply need to figure out the reason and motive behind why someone *is* or *is not* truly gathering together with believers as God commands, whether it is on Sunday or Wednesday night.

### Answers to Objections

**Objection:** One of the most misunderstood elements of the Sabbath is that it is a requirement to achieve salvation. Nothing could be more wrong. Rather it is a time to spend with God, to reflect on His creation, and to set aside a special and regular time to be with Him. The Sabbath was created by God to rest from His creation. He included it in His commandments to us to establish a special and regular time with Him.

**Answer:** Many times when a discussion about the Sabbath comes up, non-Sabbatarians will accuse Sabbatarians of trying to earn their salvation by works. That is a serious misunderstanding of the view of the Sabbath held by Covenant Theologians. My Covenant Theology believing brothers and sisters who think that God wants them to keep a weekly Sabbath-rest day, keep it because they love their Lord. I have met so many believers that I admire and wish that I had their faithfulness and love for the Lord, who believe that the way that they show their love for the Lord is by keeping the Sabbath. When I differ with Covenant Theologians about keeping the Sabbath, it is an “in-house discussion” between brothers in Christ.

**Objection:** One of the most precious things that you can give to anyone is either time or money. Church members give 1/10 of their earned wages as a tithe to God as a measure of their love for Him. We trust God and we give freely. Why can't we give 1/7 of our time as well? If we can set aside time for our spouse on a regular basis, why can't we do this for God on the day that He created for us? God knows perfectly well what is good for us, and He created commandments for us to follow. If we truly love God, keeping the commandments is not a chore, but a natural reflection of our commitment to Him.

**Answer:** All Christians give the best of their time, talent and treasure to serving Christ and His Kingdom. The question before us is simply, Does God want us to give a tithe (which I believe is an Old Covenant concept that was really a tax requirement and has been abolished and replaced with the New Covenant concept of giving freely—2 Corinthians 9:6) and set one day a week aside for rest and worship or not? How does God want us to show our love and devotion to Him? It has been my experience that my Covenant Theologian brothers have great hearts and love their Lord. The purpose of this discussion is to

sharpen one another by digging in the Scriptures, examining our presuppositions, and figuring out together how God wants us to live before Him.

## Chapter 21

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### How Often Do Believers Have To Gather Together?

Hebrews 10:24-25 is the place in the New Covenant Scriptures where we find the command for all believers to continue in fellowship. But what is the bare minimum one must gather with believers and be able to obey the commandment without sinning? Allow me to set the stage for correctly interpreting the command in Hebrews 10:24-25. The book of Hebrews is a book to a group of former Jews who seem to have become real believers. But some time after their conversion, they began to experience severe persecution at the hands of their own countrymen. They suffered for Christ and glorified him in amazing ways at first, but as time went on and the persecution continued they began to turn back to the Old Covenant in order to secure their relationship with God rather than clinging to Christ alone. The book of Hebrews then contains three central elements to address this problem that the Hebrews were experiencing. First, it contains positive teaching on the superior nature of Jesus and the New Covenant he mediates. Second, it contains exhortation to the persecution-weary Hebrews to continue to persevere in loving and following Christ. Third, it contains warnings about the disastrous consequences of continuing to turn away from Christ.

Hebrews 10:24-25 is the climax of a passage about Christ being the sole reason we can stand in God's presence. The whole passage encourages us to live for Christ because of all that He has done for us. Let's look at verses 23-25:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love

and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

As you can see, this is not so much a rule "you must attend church four times a month on the holy Sabbath in order to fulfill the sacred requirement of ritualistic attendance" as it is a command to grab the God-given spiritual life preserver of intimate fellowship with the body of Christ so that if the screaming mob grabs your husband and throws him into prison because he is a Christian and you are not sure how you are going to survive, then you have real believers who love you to encourage you to trust in the Lord. It is similar to the divinely inspired command in Hebrews 3:12-14 to mutually encourage one another:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

This is not a command that says: "Encourage someone in the body at least once every day in order to be in compliance with the command of God." This command is to God-lovers and it says: "Dig into each others lives and seek to point your brothers and sisters to Christ with all of your might because there is a spiritual battle going on and the devil is trying his best to drag each of you off into hell. Fight him by encouraging one another all the time to live for Christ with 110% of your energy. Encourage one another by reminding each other how Christ and the salvation He brings is better than anything in the Old Covenant—better than anything in the world." These commands cannot simply be boiled down to "attend church regularly." If you do not really know people at your church and they do not know you; if you are not truly encouraging others and being encouraged to live for Christ in the nitty gritty stuff of life when you gather together, then it doesn't matter if you get together 20 times a week to hear "expository preaching" and to "take communion," because you are not obeying God's command to gather together to encourage one another.

Therefore, the command to gather together cannot be quantified. If our God who is rich in mercy has truly made you alive in Christ, then you love Jesus more than anything else. This means that you are

committed to His people above your job, your leisure activities, and even above your immediate or extended family. God says that you desperately need other Christians in order to persevere in loving Jesus in the midst of trials and temptations. You need them so that you won't be deceived and enticed by your sin and dragged off into hell. Now, in light of these truths, to try to boil down the command to gather together to a bare minimum requirement is misguided. It is like considering God's command on giving in 2 Corinthians 9 ("Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver") and asking: How little or how much can I give and not be in sin?



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SECTION 5

*Other*

QUESTIONS



## Chapter 22

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### Why Bother Reading The Old Testament?

The Old Testament has an extremely relevant place in the spiritual life of the elect. The question is not whether it has a purpose or place in our spiritual lives today, but rather *how* is it to be used to the glory of God in the life of His people? We really have only two choices before us. We can choose to try to directly apply every verse of the Old Testament or we can apply the teachings of the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. If we try the former then we are stuck with passages like Leviticus 2:1-10:

When someone brings a grain offering to the LORD, his offering is to be of fine flour. He is to pour oil on it, put incense on it and take it to Aaron's sons the priests. The priest shall take a handful of the fine flour and oil, together with all the incense, and burn this as a memorial portion on the altar, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings made to the LORD by fire. If you bring a grain offering baked in an oven, it is to consist of fine flour: cakes made without yeast and mixed with oil, or wafers made without yeast and spread with oil. If your grain offering is prepared on a griddle, it is to be made of fine flour mixed with oil, and without yeast. Crumble it and pour oil on it; it is a grain offering. If your grain offering is cooked in a pan, it is to be made of fine flour and oil. Bring the grain offering made of these things to the LORD; present it to the priest, who shall take it to the altar. He shall take out the memorial portion from the grain offering and burn it on the altar as an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings made to the LORD by fire.

How should we apply this passage to our lives today? This is part of “all Scripture” which is “God breathed” to which Paul was referring in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Shall we teach, rebuke, and correct Christians concerning the proper preparation of grain offerings? That would be a mistake given our understanding of Christ and His work that is revealed in the New Testament, particularly in the book of Hebrews. Christ is our one all-sufficient sacrifice. Paul, then, must mean something else than the idea that every verse in the Old Testament is *directly* applicable to the believer in the New Covenant era.

I believe reading the Old Testament Scriptures through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures<sup>47</sup> is the key. As we look at the book of Hebrews regarding the law of the Old Covenant, and specifically as it relates to sacrifices, we find that it functions as a “shadow” of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1). So the purpose of this text for the believer today is to see the holiness of God and the fact that he demands a perfect sacrifice. But we see this only in “picture form” in Leviticus, which points to the reality that is found in Christ. The particular details of grain offerings given in Leviticus 2 are not directly applicable, but the meaning that the text as a whole holds in fulfillment is profound and must be applied to our lives everyday. Of course this process requires much study and theological reflection. But I believe it is invaluable not only to the maturity of believers, but also to the growth of our appreciation of God’s work in orchestrating all of history, and particularly the history of Israel, for His elect people living in the New Covenant era: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

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<sup>47</sup> I say New Covenant rather than New Testament Scriptures because the Gospels are a swing period in which Christ is under the Old Covenant, which was still in effect (Galatians 4:4) while simultaneously announcing the New Covenant. Therefore, the New Covenant Scriptures that serve as our sieve are the teaching passages in the epistles. They are not “more inspired” but they serve as the authoritative guide for the life of the believer today. This guidance includes authority over interpreting and applying truths found in the Old Testament Scriptures to our lives today.

## Chapter 23

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### Is New Covenant Theology “Replacement” Theology?

If someone wants to say something nasty to a New Covenant theologian, then he might crinkle his nose and say, “you believe in *replacement theology*.” By this comment he is referring to the belief that the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, “replaces” Israel as God’s chosen people. I do not like the term “replacement” because of the way it is often used and because of certain misunderstandings that can result from the term. Instead I would rather use the term “fulfillment theology.” Israel was simply a picture of the true people of God, which the church fulfills.

An analogy that illustrates NCT’s understanding of the relationship between the Israelites and the church that I have found helpful has to do with frozen dinners. When I go to the store to buy a frozen dinner, I look at the picture on the box and it tells me what is inside. Often, just by looking at the picture on the box, my mouth will begin to water. But when I bring it home, if I were to take the box and sink my fork and knife into the picture of the food and begin to eat, I would choke on the first bite of the cardboard picture! The picture was only meant to point me toward the real meal and was never meant to be the meal itself. The food inside does not replace the picture but rather is the reality to which the picture is supposed to lead me. In the same way, Israel was called God’s chosen and redeemed people, but they were not chosen for spiritual salvation or redemption from God’s wrath. They were always an unbelieving people as a whole (with a tiny remnant of believers always present). So in one sense there never was a true people of God to “replace,” but there was an expectation of a true people of God that builds to a crescendo throughout the Old Testament and is finally

satisfied in the New Testament. This true people of God actually love Him and are made up of Jews and Gentiles.

In Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul calls this group of people “one new man”:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13).

At this point in the passage it might seem that with the coming of Christ, the Gentiles are brought into the fold and added to Israel. But we will find out as we read on in this passage that this is not the case. The Israelites had an advantage in that they had the Scriptures, which contained the promise of a Messiah (Romans 3:1,2). Unless a Gentile somehow bumped up against Israel, he had no chance of hearing about the one true God and the way of salvation. But although the Israelites had an amazing advantage, they were still under God’s wrath. They were no more God’s true people than were the Gentiles. This is clearly spelled out for us in the verses that follow:

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near (Ephesians 2:14-17).

Notice that it is the work of Christ that makes “one new man out of the two.” Both Jews and Gentiles are brought together into one people of God. Also, notice that the Jews needed to be reconciled to God just like the Gentiles! Verse 16a shows that Jews and Gentiles were both in an identical relationship to God, which was under His wrath: “and in this one body to reconcile **both of them** to God through the cross” (Ephesians 2:16). So, if you have a theology that says that Israel was the true people of God and the Gentiles were simply added, you must grapple with this verse and the following verse: “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near”

(Ephesians 2:17). This verse tells us that Paul is not thinking that Israel was the people of God in the sense that they were reconciled to God and that the work of Christ simply brought the Gentiles onto equal footing. The reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles to God is contemporaneous! Christ came and gave the opportunity to be reconciled to God (preached peace) to Gentiles (you who were far away) and to Jews (those who were near).

Finally, notice that this passage teaches that God’s people, His household, is built on the foundation of the apostles and New Testament Prophets with Christ serving as the cornerstone:

For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:18-22).

This does *not* say that Gentiles were later invited to be a part of the house that was built upon the foundation of Moses and the prophets of the Old Testament! It is not as if the Gentiles are made a people of God alongside the Jewish people of God as Classical Dispensationalism espouses. Nor is it that the Gentiles are now added to the true people of God as Covenant Theology espouses. Instead, through the cross Jesus Christ has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to Himself and to one another to make “one new man,” which is the believing people of God, the church.

In summary, NCT is not replacement theology if by that you mean that God has replaced the first true people of God with people of God number two. But NCT is replacement theology if by that you mean the focus of God’s attention is no longer on a particular nation (Israel), but rather God’s preoccupation with the nation has been “replaced” or fulfilled by God showering His love on the true people of God, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles.



## Chapter 24

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### How Were Believers Saved In Old Testament Times?

This question is one that needs careful qualification so that we do not go beyond Scripture and yet affirm all that Scripture actually says about the issue. It is helpful to clarify this question and focus it on the gospel: Is the Gospel essentially *the same* throughout Scripture? The basic answer is, “Yes.” But the question is not as simple as it might seem. The way one gains acceptance from God and avoids His eternal wrath is the same throughout Scripture. Acceptance comes from trusting in the promises of God and having God apply the work of Christ on the cross to the individual.<sup>48</sup> So Abraham, David, and all Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith, in just the same way believers living in the New Covenant era are saved.

However, having affirmed this *continuity in the instrument* by which all believers are saved (grace through faith), consider Galatians 3:8 for a moment: “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” Is Paul saying that Abraham had the same gospel preached to him that you and I have? Was he told that he was a totally depraved sinner who had nothing to offer to a holy God? Was he told that God sent His one and only Son to take on human flesh and to die on a cross as an atoning sacrifice for all those who would believe? No. The content of the gospel preached to Abraham, as far as we know, was simply: “All peoples of the earth will be blessed through you”

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<sup>48</sup> I did not state this in a chronological order. Saving faith is a supernatural gift of God’s grace that is purchased on the cross and must be given to the would-be believer before he is even able to repent and believe.

(Genesis 12:3). He was promised many descendants and a physical land in which they could all live. God also promised Abraham that the nations would be blessed in some way through him. Finally, God promised Abraham that he would have a son through whom God's promises would be fulfilled. Abraham was given a supernatural ability to believe these promises; he was given the gift of faith. Abraham did not gain his salvation by works but only by God's grace acquired through faith (Romans 4:1-25). But Scripture does not reveal that Abraham had an understanding of the fundamentals of the gospel as we understand them today.

Someone might object, "Abraham had to have knowledge of the gospel as we did because otherwise he could not have been saved." But if we confine our search to Scripture, then we will find that what is revealed to Abraham simply did not include anything about sin, the need for repentance, or the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Yet, Abraham was saved. Whatever he knew was veiled in types and shadows. The most we can say with certainty is that he trusted in whatever God revealed to him and the work of Christ was applied to him retroactively, as the New Testament tells us: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26). Since Abraham believed God's promises, God put his sin debt on the "Divine credit card" and God finally paid Abraham's bill at the time of the cross.

Now a logical question that typically arises after hearing the above explanation is, "Are you saying that you didn't have to believe the gospel to be saved in Abraham's day?" This is the crux of the issue. It is a scary proposition to which I answer, "Yes and no."

God never changes. He has always saved people the same way. God applies the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross to all of His children and gives them the supernatural ability to trust in His promises and to love Him more than anything else this world has to offer. I am simply saying that the Bible nowhere even hints at the idea that Abraham had the knowledge that we do now. He lacked knowledge *that we consider essential to the gospel*, and yet God saved him. The content of the "gospel" that was preached to Abraham is stated by Paul as "All nations will be blessed through you." It is true that this *foreshadowed* or

*pointed toward* what we understand today as the gospel, but “All nations will be blessed through you” is not the gospel itself. One might say that it is the gospel in picture form, just as the sacrificial system in the Old Covenant was the gospel in picture form.

Many people have a problem with this point of view because it seems to lead to the conclusion that you do not really need to know the gospel to be saved. After all, Abraham did not have to know it, so why does anyone else have to know it? However, that is not what I am saying at all. I am saying that at different points in the history of God’s saving work with men, He had revealed different parts of His plan and His promises. Revelation is progressive. At each point in salvation history it was essential for any person who would become a believer to understand and believe what God had revealed up to that point in history. For Abraham, he had to believe the promises God made to him about a child, a land, and a nation.<sup>49</sup> It took a supernatural gift of faith for Him to believe. This faith was given to Him and He consequently became a believer and “the father of the faithful.”

In summary, trusting in the promises God reveals in the era in which you live results in you being credited righteousness. If you lived before the cross God applied the saving work of Christ to you retroactively, thereby paying your debt to God. In every age believers need to be forgiven by the application of the atoning work of Christ and to be given new God-loving hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>49</sup> We also know from Hebrews 11 that Abraham believed that there was something more to the promises God was making to Him than simply the physical promises: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).



## Chapter 25

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### Can You Hold To New Covenant Theology And Infant Baptism At The Same Time?

Infant baptism (I will deal with the variety of infant baptism held to by Covenant Theologians, which is very different from the brand of infant baptism held by Roman Catholics) and New Covenant Theology are incompatible because they are based on fundamentally different views of how the Old Covenant relates to the New Covenant.

Covenant Theology sees Old Covenant ethnic Israel and the church today as being one and the same (continuity). In the Old Covenant era, everyone *physically* related to Abraham got the covenant sign of circumcision (actually only males got the sign for obvious reasons). Circumcision was the sign that they were part of the people of God. They received the covenant sign prior to and irrespective of repentance and faith. Covenant Theology would state that Old Covenant Israel is the church in the Old Covenant era. They believe that the change from circumcision to baptism in the New Covenant era is simply a change in the sign as Gentiles are added into the people of God, but not a fundamental change in that which is being signified. Therefore, Covenant Theologians would state that just as when an ethnic Jew was physically born in the Old Covenant era and he got the sign of entrance into the people of God (circumcision), so now when a child of a Christian is physically born he gets the new sign of entrance into the people of God (baptism).

NCT, on the other hand, primarily sees discontinuity or perhaps analogy between Old Covenant Israel and the church today. NCT also sees analogy (not identity) in the meaning of circumcision and baptism.

*Old Covenant Israel was primarily an unbelieving people and they were intended to be a picture of the true people of God.* We need to illustrate this from a few different Scriptures. Just prior to giving the Old Covenant, God laid out a condition that the nation had to meet in order to be His people:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Exodus 19:3-6).

If you are familiar with your Old Testament you know that the Israelites did not keep the Mosaic Covenant and God did not make the nation His "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In Jeremiah, God summarizes the need for a New Covenant because of Israel's unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant: "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 broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 31:32).

The Apostle Peter picks up the language of Exodus 19 and applies it unconditionally to the church: "But you are a chosen people, *a royal priesthood, a holy nation*, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). The church is the true people of God that the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era only foreshadowed, just as Christ is the true sacrifice that the blood of bulls and goats shed in the Old Covenant era only foreshadowed.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Circumcision and Baptism**

*The similarity between the signs of circumcision and baptism is two-fold.* First, both signs mark entrance into the people of God (Genesis 17:9-14, Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:36-39). Second, the entrance into both the Old Covenant and New Covenant peoples of God is by birth as a child of Abraham. God commands Abraham to give all of his descendants (and all those in his household) the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant:

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Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Genesis 17:9-14).

You were one of Abraham's descendants if you were born of Abraham (or bought as a slave). The New Covenant people of God is made up of those born of Abraham as well: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" (Romans 4:16).

*The contrast between the signs of circumcision and baptism is also twofold.* First, circumcision marks entrance into the unbelieving Old Covenant people of God (Genesis 17:9-14), while baptism marks entrance into the God-loving, true people of God (Colossians 2:11-12). Second, birth into the people of God as a child of Abraham in the Old Covenant era is a reference to physical birth, while in the New Covenant era, birth into the people of God is a reference to spiritual birth or the gift of repentance and faith:

...Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:3-8).

## Other Questions

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In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12).

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God (Romans 2:28-29).

Consequently, infant baptism and NCT are not compatible for a variety of reasons. The most basic reason is that at the heart of NCT is the understanding that the relationship between Israel and the church is one of picture and fulfillment. In contrast, the theology behind the practice of infant baptism is based on the belief that Israel and the church are both the true people of God. They see Israel and the church as identical rather than having a picture and fulfillment relationship.

## Chapter 26

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### What Is The Difference Between Progressive Dispensationalism And New Covenant Theology?

Before I can spell out the differences between the two theological systems, we need to define Progressive Dispensationalism (PD). But even before we define PD, I would like to express my appreciation for Progressive Dispensationalism. Although I part ways with PD as a system of theology, as a movement Progressive Dispensationalists have been characterized by a willingness to open their Bibles and discuss what Scripture says with each other and those from differing theological perspectives. Proponents of PD have much to offer by way of rigorous exegesis and insightful conclusions to difficult theological questions.

#### **The Main Hermeneutical Presupposition of Dispensationalism**

PD is a brand of Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism, even PD, is markedly different than New Covenant Theology. What beliefs make someone a Dispensationalist? What differentiates a garden-variety Dispensationalist from a Progressive Dispensationalist? In the first chapter of the excellent book *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison Between Traditional and Progressive Views*, Hebert Bateman IV writes the following: “What marks a dispensationalist is the person’s stress on the uniqueness of the church and confidence that a future millennial period exists in human history when God will consummate His Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants with national Israel through the physical, earthly reign of Jesus Christ here on earth—that are the linchpins for distinguishing a

dispensationalist from a nondispensationalist.”<sup>50</sup> Prominent Progressive Dispensationalist Darrell Bock writes: “So progressives speak openly as other dispensationalists do, of a future for national Israel among the nations in the Millennium. It is this detail that makes a premillennial view dispensational.”<sup>51</sup> The presupposition that drives dispensational hermeneutics is that the promises made in the Old Testament must be fulfilled without change of original meaning. PD (as opposed to other brands of Dispensationalism) simply adds a caveat to this presupposition, which is that although the Old Testament promises must be fulfilled as their original promises in their original contexts describe, there can be expansion in the fulfillment. Darrel Bock calls this approach to Old Testament promises in the New Covenant era a “complementary” approach: “According to this approach the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original.”<sup>52</sup> What this means is that the church is not the pinnacle of God’s plan, but rather a parenthesis in God’s plan that once again will return to focus on Israel. Although PD has moved light years from traditional Dispensationalism in its understanding of the kingdom, it seems clear that traditional Dispensationalism and PD still exist as distant planets in the one solar system called Dispensationalism.

### Considering Our Differences

If you are a New Covenant theologian, then your hermeneutic is quite different from the “complementary” hermeneutic of a Progressive Dispensationalist. The driving theological presupposition of PD is that when God promises something in the Old Testament, it must be fulfilled as it was stated in its Old Covenant context. Otherwise, according to PD, God is not true to His word and the Old Testament cannot be read with any stable meaning. NCT, on the other hand, views the Old Testament through the lens of the New. That is our driving theological presupposition. Therefore, if the New Covenant Scriptures interpret an Old Testament promise differently than the plain reading

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<sup>50</sup> *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison Between Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Hebert Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 22-23.

<sup>51</sup> Darrell Bock, “Summary Essay,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 292.

<sup>52</sup> *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392-393.

## What Is The Difference Between Progressive Dispensationalism And New Covenant Theology?

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of that Old Covenant promise, then we say that God has interpreted His own promise in a very surprising way. *But there is no need or expectation for a fulfillment of the Old Covenant promise beyond that which the New Covenant states. There is no need for the Old Testament promise to be fulfilled in the way it stands in its Old Covenant context if the New Covenant interprets it otherwise.* If God says in later revelation that the fulfillment of a particular promise is different than I anticipated and He even changes the nature of the original promise, where can I go in Scripture to tell me that the promise as it stood in its original context must *also* be realized? NCT says “nowhere.”

In order to reveal and clarify the major differences between Progressive Dispensationalist and New Covenant Theologian, I have constructed a fictional dialogue between a progressive dispensationalist whom I call Pete and a New Covenant theologian whose name is Ned. Keep in mind that this dialogue is not meant to be exhaustive of the two theological positions, but rather it is simply meant to help the reader understand how the two systems of theology differ in their hermeneutics. Progressive Pete and New Covenant Ned are discussing Amos 9 and how it is quoted in Acts 15. I will place the passages before you and then jump right into the dialogue.

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name, " declares the LORD, who will do these things (Amos 9:11-12).

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. <sup>13</sup>When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things" that have been known for ages.

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 (Acts 15:12-20).

What follows is a fictional dialogue (based on my past dialogues with Progressive Dispensationalists) between a Progressive Dispensationalist and a New Covenant Theologian on these passages.

**New Covenant Ned:** So, do you believe that James is rightly interpreting Amos?

**Progressive Pete:** Of course. I just don't think that the fulfillment in James exhausts the fulfillment of God's promise given in Amos. I think it is overly simplistic to say that the fulfillment is exhausted simply because James made a connection with Amos in the salvation of the Gentiles.

**Ned:** But notice, salvation to the Gentiles is understood as the rebuilding of David's fallen tent. It is crystal clear from Amos 9 that this refers to the restoration of Israel. A straightforward reading of the passage in Acts leads one to believe that what was going on in James' day "equals" the restoration of Israel. That which is surprising is that James is really speaking about the salvation of the Gentiles. What is it in Acts 15 leads you to believe that James did not intend this to entirely fulfill Amos 9?

**Pete:** There are other verses in the same chapter of Amos that seem to specifically deal with ethnic Israel. Look at the verses that immediately follow those verses quoted in Acts:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the LORD your God (Amos 9:13-15).

What do you do with these verses? Should we interpret Amos 9:14-15 as referring to the church even though Amos is clearly prophesying about Israel? The burden of proof is on you.

## What Is The Difference Between Progressive Dispensationalism And New Covenant Theology?

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**Ned:** I think you are missing my point. It is true that the verses you quoted and the verses that James quotes in the book of Acts, in the context of Amos had *only* to do with Israel. But James, in the book of Acts, applies these verses from the book of Amos to the church and more specifically to the Gentiles. James applied a promise given *only* to ethnic Israel and showed that the promise was being fulfilled in the church. According to the book of Acts, the church *is* David's fallen tent rebuilt.

So, when you quote Amos 9:13-15 as arguing that these verses are specific to ethnic Israel, I go back to Amos and consider if the context of those verses is somehow different than the context of Amos 9:11-12. It is not. Amos 9:13-15 is referring to the same event as 9:11-12, which James quotes and applies to the salvation of the Gentiles. Look at the context in Amos. It is all about the restoration of Israel. James says it is fulfilled in the church. Look at the rebuilding language in verse 11 and then in verse 14. In the context of Amos the verses are talking about the same people. So, if James claims that what is happening in Acts (the building of the church by the ingathering of the Gentiles) is actually fulfilling Amos 9:11-12—the restoration of "David's fallen tent" and the restoration "of its ruins"—it also fulfills verses 14-15 (the same event just repeated in different language, which is very common in Hebrew poetry) "I will bring back my exiled people Israel (David's fallen tent) they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them." The theme in both sets of verses is restoration and rebuilding and that which is being restored and rebuilt is the nation of Israel.

**Pete:** Once again, it seems to me that you might be oversimplifying things. I think part of the confusion is that there are several (sometimes overlapping) groups to consider: ethnic Israel, unbelieving Israel, believing Israel or "the remnant," unbelieving Gentiles, and the Church (made up of Jews and Gentiles). There can be confusion when we don't know exactly to whom certain promises are made. For example, Paul quotes Isaiah in Romans 9:27-28:

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality."

Paul makes a distinction between national Israel and the remnant of believing Israel. Paul writes in Romans 11:28-29: "From the standpoint

of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." The "gifts and calling of God" have to do with the promises made to the Patriarchs. National Israel is beloved of God for the sake of the patriarchs to whom God made several promises. God still has a plan for national Israel.

**Ned:** I think you made a logical leap here from the argument concerning the remnant within national Israel to national Israel itself. But I want you to notice how you moved from the passages we were discussing straight to Romans 11. We need to stay with the passages we were discussing and get to the bottom of the issue in Amos and Acts before we move on to an entirely different passage.

**Pete:** Sure. Let's go back to considering the passages in question. I think you did not adequately consider the context of Acts 15. Context is of the utmost importance. In Acts 15, James is trying to make one point and one point only: The Gentiles have an inheritance in God's Kingdom in the church age and should not be burdened with Mosaic regulations. That's it! To press his statement further would be to read beyond the context of the situation of the Jerusalem council and to read into the text.

**Ned:** I agree that context is king when considering interpretation. But I think you actually miss the larger contextual issue. Why did people think that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and to obey the law of Moses? The reason fills the book of Acts and that is the struggle for the Jews to see how salvation could come to the Gentiles. Peter's vision is repeated four times! The whole book of Acts concerns the movement of the gospel from just the Jews to people from all over the world! So in this context, James' statement takes on immense importance. The gospel going to the world is the fulfillment of Amos 9 and the restoration of "David's fallen tent." The salvation of God's elect from every tribe nation and tongue (Revelation 5:9) is the fulfillment of the restoration of Israel prophesied about in Amos 9. It is parallel to the fulfillment of the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31. The author of Hebrews interprets Jeremiah 31 and the promise of the New Covenant to be fulfilled in Christ and what he is doing right now.

## What Is The Difference Between Progressive Dispensationalism And New Covenant Theology?

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**Pete:** I don't disagree that the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 was referring to the work of Christ. But you limit that fulfillment to the church rather than allowing the clear referent of the promise (the house of Israel and the house of Judah) to be included.

**Ned:** I don't think your system of interpretation allows for the simplest and clearest understanding of this Old Testament quotation in Hebrews 8 and 10. The restoration of Israel and Judah in Jeremiah 31 is taken by the author of Hebrews to refer to the work of Christ in the church. You might say that that is only part of the fulfillment. But Hebrews gives no hint that there is to be another fulfillment. That is why I argue that we must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament and not the other way around. It seems to me that your interpretation of passages like Amos 9 and Jeremiah 31 are driven by the Old Testament context. Let me ask you a question: Is Jeremiah 31 completely fulfilled? Or is the church only the beginning of that fulfillment?

**Pete:** No, it is not completely fulfilled and the author of Hebrews never said that it was. In Hebrews 8, the author is trying to make a specific point: the superiority of the New Covenant. That's it. What I object to is trying to make this passage say more than it does. You probably think that God's land promises to national Israel are null and void because of the New Covenant. Of course, the passage does not say this. He is not addressing that issue at all.

**Ned:** I think you narrowed the context too much again. It is not just the superiority of the New Covenant but the passing away of the Old Covenant and all that it was. The Old Covenant was just a shadow (10:1) pointing to the reality of the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is null and void (Hebrews 8:13). This means Israel's special nation status with God is null and void. It follows that the promises of real estate to the nation of Israel are also no longer in effect because they are all part of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant era, the true people of God are from every tribe, nation, and tongue. Their "Promised Land" is not physical rest in a physical land but spiritual rest with God.

**Pete:** You are ascribing the promise of an enduring nation and an inheritance of land to the Moasic covenant. But the promise of land and a nation come from the Abrahamic Covenant! Look at Genesis 17:

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:3-8).

**Ned:** I think you are misunderstanding the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant and its place in God's plan. The Old Testament tells us that all of the physical promises given in the Abrahamic covenant were fulfilled and yet the book of Hebrews tells us that they weren't really fulfilled. Land didn't really give the people rest. The real rest is spiritual rest where you don't work for your salvation because Jesus, our high priest, did the work for us.

**Pete:** Now you are simply spiritualizing without warrant.

**Ned:** I don't think so. If you simply read the account of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis you will only find physical promises: God will make Abraham's physical offspring innumerable. He will give them the physical land. God will cause Abraham to be a father of kings and he will be the God of Abraham and his physical descendants. That's it. I encourage you to read Genesis 12, 15, and 17 again because it is shocking how clear the physical promises are. But these promises are actually fulfilled in history. In the book of Joshua, once the Israelites are in the promised land, we read: "Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Joshua 23:14). *All* of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were fulfilled in the nation of Israel. That means there is no physical land promise waiting to be fulfilled! Pause a moment to let the weight of this passage of Scripture hit you. This "fulfillment" is simply in relation to the physical outworking or physical fulfillment of the promises. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham and the other believers in the Old Testament did not receive the things promised: "All these people were still living by faith when they died.

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They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:13, 39-40). Joshua 23:14 tells us that they received the physical promises and yet in another sense the book of Hebrews tells us that they did not receive the promises. The author of Hebrews is referring to the spiritual fulfillment of the physical promises.

It seems to me that you are actually jumping backwards to the physical fulfillment, which was merely a shadow of what we have now when you argue that you expect the physical descendants of Abraham to receive the physical promises. Now we have real spiritual rest for real spiritual people. To jump back to the shadows in these areas is logically equivalent to going back to the animal sacrifices rather than looking to the sacrifice of Christ as the sole fulfillment of what God was doing in the Old Testament.

**Pete:** How can I respond to all of that? Let me stick to the clear point you raised and respond. You say that according to my logic I should be going back to the animal sacrifices (or at least looking forward to them). No. The land promises made to Israel and the Mosaic Code are obviously not the same thing. I am not talking about Mosaic Law or sacrificial regulations. Of course these have been fulfilled in Christ. I am referring to the land promises made to national Israel.

**Ned:** You may say they are obviously fulfilled but according to your system of interpretation if Scripture says in the Old Testament that there will be a priesthood and a temple and animal sacrifices in the future, then there must be a literal fulfillment. Consider Jeremiah 33:

“For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices.’”

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD says: 'If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David

will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore' " (Jeremiah 33:17-22)

The hermeneutic of PD demands that there must be a literal fulfillment to the verses above, but Hebrews 7 tells us that Christ is the fulfillment of the Levitical priests (that are weak and useless). If we consistently apply your hermeneutic, we must conclude that Christ is simply the preliminary fulfillment of Hebrews 7 and there must be a day in the future where there will be scads of Levitical priests continually making burnt offerings, grain offerings and presenting sacrifices. It seems to me that to say that Christ totally fulfills the prophecies about a literal Levitical priesthood and literal animal sacrifices destroys the PD hermeneutic. Just as I am not to look for a Levitical priesthood offering animal sacrifices in the future, so also I am not to look for a physical nation inheriting a physical land. Instead, I look to the fulfillment of the Levitical priesthood—Jesus Christ—and I look to the fulfillment of the physical people of God resting in the physical land—the church resting from working to earn His favor now and ultimately going to live with Him in Heaven for eternity.

### Conclusion

I hope this dialogue has served to reveal and clarify the major differences in hermeneutics between PD and NCT. In summary, PD believes that if God says in later revelation that the fulfillment of a particular promise is different than the original promise in its Old Covenant context, then the promise *as stated in its original context* must come to pass. The New Covenant fulfillment may expand the promise but it will not change it. NCT asserts that we must read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. This means that if the New Covenant fulfillment of an Old Covenant promise changes the nature of the original promise, then we *have no biblical reason to expect the Old Covenant promise will be fulfilled as the promise stood in its Old Covenant context*.

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## APPENDICES



# Appendix A

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## Did Paul Misinterpret The Old Testament?<sup>53</sup> Examining Paul's Use Of The Old Testament In Romans 9:23-29

If you read your New Testament carefully, you will find that its authors quote the Old Testament quite often. As you develop the practice of going back to the Old Testament and looking up the passages quoted in the New Testament, you will run into a problem. You will find that many times the authors of the New Testament quote the Old Testament in ways that seem to bend, twist, and even break the Old Testament context in which the verses were originally written. The Apostle Paul's use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:24-29 is particularly difficult in this regard. Paul takes verses from the book of Hosea and from the book of Isaiah and quotes them in this short passage. The passage is notoriously difficult to interpret because Paul seems to use verses from Hosea and Isaiah in ways that the prophets never intended. In fact, the way Paul seems to bend and twist the Old Testament Scriptures in this passage has caused many people to ask the question: "Did Paul misinterpret the Old Testament?"

### **The Key to Understanding Scripture**

The leading conservative seminaries tell us that we must learn Hebrew and Greek in order to *really* understand Scripture. They tell us: "Become a Hebrew and Greek scholar and the treasures of God's Word will be opened up to you!" This is simply not true. I learned Hebrew

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<sup>53</sup> I stole the idea and title of this essay from a lecture given by Geoff Volker in the Spring of 2004.

and Greek, and although I have found this knowledge helpful at times, it is by no means the key to understanding the Scriptures. In fact, knowing Hebrew and Greek can be detrimental to your growth in understanding God's Word. Consider the many biblical scholars that have spent decades studying Hebrew and Greek. They can go into great linguistic detail about a particular word or phrase, but too often they don't have a clue as to the meaning and application of the passage in which the word or phrase occurs. Often biblical scholars can give great linguistic detail about verb tenses, but they can't tell you how a passage of Scripture or a book of the Bible relates to the rest of Scripture. This fact should make it clear that you do not have to be a linguistic genius to understand God's Word. The key to unlocking the treasures of God's Word is reading Scripture *in context*. It is the art of reading the nouns, verbs, and adjectives in a particular passage within the flow of the argument in which they were written and then relating your findings to the whole of Scripture.

### **The New Testament Context**

Rather than make the mistake of isolating the verses we are trying to interpret, we want to consider these verses in the light of the whole book of Romans and particularly in the light of Paul's concerns in chapter 9. In the first eight chapters of the book of Romans, Paul discusses the gospel and the amazing salvation that everyone for whom Jesus died receives. The wrath of God that everyone deserves is perfectly satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for every believer. Because of the payment for sins gained by the death of Christ, every believer is declared righteous in the court of heaven (justification) and receives a changed life in which he will persevere in loving Jesus and growing in holiness until he dies (sanctification). In Romans 9-11, Paul explains the place of Israel in God's grand plan to save a people and make them His own. In the beginning of Romans 9, Paul explains how Israel as a nation had a bucket full of Divine benefits. Yet, salvation was not one of the benefits that Israel received. In verse six Paul writes, "It is not as though God's word had failed." Now why would we think God's word had failed? It looked like God's word had failed because Israel as a nation had not believed. A very small number of Israelites believed and currently believe, but most reject Christ. They were called the people of God, but they were the very people who were persecuting Christ and His disciples at the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. It

looks as if God's plan went awry. But, according to Paul in Romans 9, God's plan was working out perfectly:

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring (Romans 9:6-8).

Paul is saying that not all of the physical people of God are the spiritual people of God. Just because you are a physical child of Abraham in no way means that you are also a spiritual child of Abraham. The only way you become part of the real people of God, the spiritual children of Abraham, is by God choosing you.

God has always been a God who chooses to have mercy on those He desires to have mercy, and chooses to harden those He desires to harden. This causes us to ask two questions: (1) How can God blame me for rejecting Him if He is the all-powerful and sovereign God who is controlling me and causing me to reject Him? (2) If God has not chosen to make me part of the real people of God, to save me, then why did He make me in the first place? The answers to these questions are humbling and amazing. First, we are told that we cannot question God's right to do as He pleases. When we question God in this way, we have overstepped our bounds because we are mere creatures and He is the Creator: "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this? Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" (Romans 9:20,21) In answer to the second question Paul gives us a glimpse into the mind of God. The reason God made people whom He will not save is so that those people He chooses to save will be better able to better grasp the great value of the mercy they have received: "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory..." (Romans 9:22-23). Therefore, even those who will not be saved have an important part to play in God's plan. We are now on the doorstep of the verses we want

to consider, verses 24-29. Let's examine these verses and how Paul uses the Old Testament.

**God will bring Gentiles to spiritual salvation: Paul's Use of Hosea 1:10 and 2:23**

In verses 23b-26 Paul begins to explain just who the elect are. We find in verse 24 that God's elect is a group of people made up of both Jews *and* Gentiles:

What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory, even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God' " (Romans 9:23-26).

Notice that Paul uses the quotations from Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 to support the fact that God has included Gentiles in His plan of salvation. Although he is talking about God's election to salvation of both Jews and Gentiles, the emphasis in verse 24 is on the inclusion of the Gentiles. Paul's point is that those who were once strangers and aliens to the promise and hope of salvation are now included. The gospel first came to the Jews. Paul went to the synagogues first. The Jews rejected the gospel message. Paul shook the dust off his feet and took the gospel to the Gentiles. From that point on, the preponderance of the people of God has been Gentiles. Now if you didn't pay attention to the original context of Paul's quotation from the book of Hosea, this understanding of the verses Paul quotes might seem pretty straightforward. Let's take another look at the quotations: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one," and, "It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'" (Romans 9:25,26; Hosea 1:10, 2:23). Who are those who Paul identifies as "not my people" and "not my loved one"? Well, they were Gentiles of course! Paul argues that God is now choosing Gentiles to be a part of His family. Paul's point is that God is saving Gentiles and He uses Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 to support this point.

The Old Testament tells us over and over again that the Jews were God's people. Now, according to Paul, God is bringing the Gentiles

into the people of God. Paul is using Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 to support his premise that God is opening up the door of salvation to the Gentiles that was previously shut. For 1500 years the nations of the world did not have the gospel, which the Jews had (at least in picture form). The only way the Gentiles could find out about the gospel was to somehow bump up against the nation of Israel. Israel was a tiny nation and the chances of a random Gentile finding Israel and getting adopted into the culture and religion was slim to none. From Sinai to the time of Christ, the bulk of the world was ignored when it came to God's revelation of a way to be accepted by Him. Civilizations came and went without ever getting to hear the Gospel. Were any of God's elect there? Apparently they were not. But, Paul tells us in these verses that God is changing all that and Hosea prophesied about it!

**God Will Save a Remnant of Israelites From Spiritual Destruction: Paul's Use of Isaiah 1:9 and 10:22-23**

In verses 27-29 Paul turns his attention from the Gentiles to Israel and quotes from the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah" (Romans 9:27-29).

Just as in the previous verses Paul told us which group of people Hosea was referring to (Gentiles), so now Paul tells us which group Isaiah was referring to (Jews). Paul's interpretations of Isaiah 1:9 and 10:22-23 are straightforward in his argument: Only a small number of Jews will be (spiritually) saved. Although there are many, many, many physical descendants of Abraham (like the sand by the sea), only a small number will be chosen by God to be saved. Unlike the time God wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah completely, the Lord has been and will be merciful with Israel by choosing to save a small number of Israelites.

**The Original Context**

Now that we have established Paul's interpretations of the verses that he quotes, we need to zoom in on the texts themselves and consider their original contexts in the Old Testament. What did Hosea and

Isaiah intend these verses to mean? As we compare Paul's interpretation of these verses to the meaning of these verses in their Old Testament context, we will begin to see a hermeneutic arise from Scripture. We will catch a glimpse of how God, the Divine author of all of Scripture, interprets His own words! But first we must simply examine the verses that Paul quotes in Romans 9:24-29 in their original contexts.

**God will restore the nation of Israel both spiritually and physically:  
Hosea's Use of Hosea 1:10 and 2:23**

Hosea is a pretty simple story. God tells Hosea the prophet that he must marry a girl named Gomer. God tells Hosea that Gomer is a prostitute and that she will be an adulteress throughout their marriage. Hosea marries Gomer and she starts shacking up with all sorts of guys. She gets in trouble and is sold into slavery. Hosea buys her back. Once again she begins to sleep around. She constantly cheats on him and Hosea constantly takes her back and cares for her. We are told in the book of Hosea that Gomer represents Israel's unfaithfulness to God, while Hosea represents God's patience and kindness toward Israel. The entire book of Hosea deals exclusively with the nation Israel.

Hosea 2:23, which is the first of the two verses that Paul quotes in Romans 9:24-26, is part of a typical passage about the restoration of the nation of Israel found in the Minor Prophets. It is all about bringing Israel back into right relationship with God and about Israel experiencing the blessing of God in the form of health, wealth, and real estate. Chapter 2 is actually full of bad news—Israel is to be punished for her unfaithfulness. Verse 13 is the last word about the punishment Israel is going to get. Then the tide turns in verse 14 to restoration:

I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot," declares the LORD . "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:13-14).

Verses 21-23 is a continuation of this tender and hopeful theme of God restoring his people, the nation of Israel, in a day in the future:

"In that day I will respond," declares the LORD - "I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved

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one. 'I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God' " (Hosea 2:21-23).

God, through His prophet Hosea, tells the people of Israel that He will restore them in the future. He will make the people he is now rejecting (the physical Israelites) His people again. Remember, Gomer personifies Israel and therefore her children (who are the product of adultery) are called "not my loved one" and "not my people." God is rejecting Israel. The people that are "not my loved one" are the physical Israelites and the promise here is that to those same people God will say "you are my people" and they will respond "you are my God." Hosea is prophesying that Israel is going to come back to God (because God is going to draw her to Himself) in spiritual faithfulness. This will result in Israel coming back to the physical land. It couldn't be any clearer unless Hosea had drawn us a picture!

Now let's take a close look Hosea 1:10, which is the other verse that Paul quoted in Romans 9. We need to read Hosea 1:2-11 to grasp the context:

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel." Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah, for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them. Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them-not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God." After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God. **Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'** The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel (Hosea 1:2-11).

Verse 10 is straightforward. Gomer's children are the children born out of unfaithfulness. Gomer was an adulteress and the children were the fruit of her unfaithfulness to her husband. Gomer and her children are

an illustration for Israel about the state of Israel's relationship to God. The children are given names that signify God's rejection of Israel. The Lord is rejecting the Israelites for their spiritual infidelity. In Hosea 1:10 God tells us that in the future the Lord will reverse this rejection. He will multiply the people of Israel and restore the nation both spiritually and physically. This reversal is spelled out in a reiteration of the Abrahamic promise of fruitfulness (Genesis 22:17), new names given with positive meaning, and specific and concrete promises of what the Lord will do for the nation of Israel.

**God will save a remnant of ethnic Israelites from physical destruction:  
Isaiah's Use of Isaiah 1:9 and 10:22-23**

Unless you have a grasp on the structure of the book of Isaiah, it will be a difficult book for you to read. In a nutshell, the book of Isaiah is structured like the English Bible. In the English Bible there are 66 books and there are 66 chapters in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 books of the Bible make up the Old Testament and the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are generally about God judging the nation of Israel and then about God judging all those nations He uses to judge Israel. The next 27 books of the Bible make up the New Testament and the next 27 chapters of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) are generally about God's future blessing for the nation of Israel. Both of the quotations Paul chose to use in Romans 9 fall in this first section—the judgment section of the book.

Chapter 1 describes how, in spite of the Israelites' constant rebellion, there will still be a remnant that will not be physically destroyed:

Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege. **Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah** (Isaiah 1:5-9).

The Lord completely wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah, leaving no survivors. But Isaiah prophesies that when God sends the Assyrians to destroy the Israelites, He is going to be merciful and leave some survivors.

The context of chapter 10 is a prophecy of Isaiah that describes the time when God will judge Israel. It describes a physical judgment that God will bring on the land and on the people of Israel:

Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood! Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame. The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars. The splendor of his forests and fertile fields it will completely destroy, as when a sick man wastes away. And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down. In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. **Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous. The Lord, the LORD Almighty, will carry out the destruction decreed upon the whole land** (Isaiah 10:15-23).

Isaiah is prophesying loud and clear that God is going to physically destroy, kill, and scatter Israel to such a degree that although there are many of them right now, only a remnant of Israel will be saved from this destruction. According to Isaiah, only a tiny remnant of ethnic Israelites will return to the physical land the Lord gave them after this act of Divine judgment.

### **The Blessing of a Good Chart**

Now that we have looked at all of the passages and carefully examined each verse in context, it is time to put it all together in one eye-pleasing chart. The blessing of a good chart is that it allows you to summarize a lot of information and highlight contrasts in a way that is impossible with prose. So, consider the contrast between the original meaning of the Old Testament texts and Paul's understanding of those texts in the following chart:

Scripture Reference	Original Old Testament Meaning	Paul's Interpretation in Romans 9:24-29
Hosea 1:10, 2:23	God will restore the nation of Israel both spiritually and physically.	God will bring Gentiles to spiritual salvation.
Isaiah 1:9, 10:22-23	God will save a tiny remnant of ethnic Israelites from physical destruction.	God will save a tiny remnant from among the ethnic Israelites from Spiritual destruction.

When the physical and spiritual salvation of Israel as a whole is being referred to as the fulfillment of prophecy to Israel, Paul interprets it as referring to the spiritual salvation of the Gentiles. When Paul quotes a prophecy regarding God's plan to save a small part of Israel from physical and spiritual destruction, he interprets it as referring to that small portion of the elect of Israel that is being and will be saved from spiritual destruction through the death of Jesus Christ.

**Why Paul Replaces Israel with the Gentiles when Interpreting Some Prophecies: Paul was a *Replacement* Theologian.**

The Apostle Paul saw the current spiritual salvation of Gentiles fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies concerning the physical and spiritual salvation of Old Covenant Israel as a whole. The spiritual salvation of the Gentiles, in Paul's mind, replaces the physical/spiritual restoration of the nation of Israel. Therefore, Paul's use of the two passages from Hosea in this manner reveals that Paul is a replacement theologian.<sup>54</sup> What we now need to figure out is why Paul sees Israel as being replaced by the Gentiles.

As we dig into Scripture we will find that this "replacement motif" is not an isolated incident in Romans chapter 9. Rather, this idea of "replacement" was the understanding of how Scripture fits together that all of the authors of Scripture shared. Beginning with the Gospels we find that Jesus and the Apostles repeatedly went first to the Jews, who

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<sup>54</sup> We don't like the term "replacement" because of the way it is used and because of certain misunderstandings that can result from the term. Instead I would rather use the term "fulfillment theology" and "fulfillment theologian." But since "replacement theology" is the label most folks have heard before, we have decided to use that in this article.

rejected the gospel, and then to the Gentiles, who often responded favorably.<sup>55</sup>

**Why Paul Doesn't Replace Israel with the Gentiles when Interpreting Some Prophecies: Paul was a *Remnant* Theologian.**

When Paul quotes a prophecy regarding God's plan to save a small part of Israel from physical and spiritual destruction, he interprets it as referring to that small portion of the elect of Israel that is being and will be saved from spiritual destruction through the death of Jesus Christ. As you read your New Testament, it is not until you get to Paul's argument about God, Israel, and salvation in Romans 9-11 that you find any hope for Israel at all.<sup>56</sup> Paul understood that the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era was not an end in and of itself. It was only the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. The spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is found in the church, the New Covenant people of God. Yet, in the New Covenant era, individual Israelites still have a role to play. They can become part of the New Covenant people of God.

**Conclusion**

There is a lot to learn from Paul's use of the Old Testament. Even though at first glance it seems that Paul misinterpreted the Old Testament when he quoted Hosea and Isaiah in Romans 9:24-29, he didn't. Having been given more light by God as to His plan of salvation than any of the Old Testament prophets, Paul had the big picture in view when he wrote his inspired interpretation of these Old Testament prophecies. He understood that the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era functioned only as a picture of the true people of God. He grasped that, as a whole, Israel was always an unbelieving people. Like Jesus, Paul taught that God was replacing the Old Covenant nation of Israel that God called "my people," with a people that would actually love God and live for Him. Paul said that this new people would be made up primarily of Gentiles. Therefore, Paul tells us how God interprets Old Testament prophecy about national Israel. God's promise to save the nation of Israel is fulfilled in God saving the Gentiles. When

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<sup>55</sup> For detailed support of this point see chapter 6: "How Does New Covenant Theology View Israel?"

<sup>56</sup> For more on Paul's view of Israel in Romans 9-11 see chapter 8: "Does Romans 11 Say That There Is A Special Future For Israel?"

God spoke through the prophets he spoke in types and shadows. Paul sheds more Divine light on the subject and shows us that God's promises for the salvation of one tiny nation are fulfilled in salvation going to the world—God saving people from every tribe, nation, and language. He also tells us that God's promise to save a remnant of ethnic Israelites remains and gives continuing hope to individual Israelites. If an Israelite repents and believes, then God will even save him in spite of unfaithful history of the people of Israel.

## Appendix B

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### Should We Say, “I Hate You,” In Jesus’ Name? How To Think About The War Psalms In The New Covenant Era

I often go to the Psalms for comfort in times of trouble and for encouragement when I am weary. The words of the Psalmist often echo the cry of my own heart. But there are some Psalms that trouble me. They trouble me because they seem to amplify what I consider the sinful desires of my heart. These troubling Psalms are called the War Psalms or the Imprecatory (cursing) Psalms. These divinely inspired passages of Scripture are full of cursing, hatred, and desire for revenge. Psalm 109 is perhaps the best example of an imprecatory Psalm. In this Psalm David tells us that he has been sinned against. He has been stepped on and stabbed in the back. His prayer to God concerning his enemy is as follows:

Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the LORD, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. (Psalm 109:6-15).

David is praying for his enemy. He is asking God to make his enemy suffer. Notice that David not only prays for bad things to happen to his enemy, but he also prays for God to make bad things happen to his enemy's entire family! On the face of it, this sounds more like a rant from an embittered Mafioso than a holy prayer from one of God's servants. The final piece of the prayer is the most amazing. He asks God to always remember his enemy's sin. The blessing of the New Covenant is that God no longer remembers our sin (Hebrews 8:12). David is asking God to send his enemy to hell! There are many times that I am tempted to pray to God using David's words in Psalm 109 concerning my enemies, but then I read the New Testament and I have to pause and consider whether my actions are God-honoring. Here are just two New Testament passages that cause me to call into question the practice of cursing my enemies:

You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:38-45).

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21).

Why did God put his divine stamp of approval on David's vengeful prayer in Psalm 109 and then tell us in the New Testament that having such a heart towards our enemies is sinful? Jesus tells us that we are to "pray for those who persecute" us. Could Jesus have had a "Psalm 109 prayer" in mind when he said those words? Can we righteously pray to God that our enemies suffer, that their families suffer, and that they be sent to hell for all eternity? Should we say to our enemies, "I hate you in Jesus' name?"

### Holy Hacking and Loving your Neighbor

The problem we have is that it seems that there are two entirely different sets of ethics in Scripture—one for the Old Covenant and one for the New Covenant. That is not exactly accurate, but there is some truth in it. You see, in the wisdom of God, the Israelites were not obligated to love their enemies.<sup>57</sup> In fact, they were commanded by God Himself to hate their enemies. Look at God's holy command to the Israelites to destroy their neighbors:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

One of the ways the Israelites were told to stay away from sin was by hacking their neighbors to death! They were to slaughter every man, woman, and child that God told them to kill. It would have been a bloody mess that would make the goriest horror movie seem like an innocent Saturday morning cartoon by comparison. God himself commanded the Israelites to actually kill all of the inhabitants in a given city, from babies to old ladies!

Consider Joshua's holy hatred for his enemies. He was faithful to the Lord in his execution of God's orders:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them over to Israel, slain. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots." So Joshua and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel. They defeated them and pursued them all the way to Greater Sidon, to Misrephoth Maim, and to the Valley of Mizpah on the east, until no survivors were left. Joshua did to them as the LORD had directed: He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots. At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hazor and put its king to the sword (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms). Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not

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<sup>57</sup> An objection may be raised that they were to "show love to the alien in their midst as they were once aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19, etc). This is true, but it seems that a differentiation should be made between "alien in their midst" to whom they were to show love, and their enemy whom they were to destroy.

sparing anything that breathed, and he burned up Hazor itself. Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded (Joshua 11:6-12).

If that isn't an example of hating your enemies, then I don't know what is. At the command of God, Joshua and the men of Israel killed everyone in the city of Hazor and burned the city to the ground. That is definitely not something you do to people because you love them so much! Consider another example from the Old Covenant era. In 2 Chronicles, God rebukes King Jehoshaphat through Jehu the seer because the king has been too kind and loving to the wicked:

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, the wrath of the LORD is upon you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God" (19:1-3).

The wrath of God was on Jehoshaphat because he did not have the holy hatred for some of his neighbors that God's holy law required him to demonstrate.

You may be thinking, "I know the Israelites were commanded to love their neighbors somewhere in the Old Testament." You are right! In Leviticus 19:18 Moses records God's words: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." This verse should sound familiar since it is found in both the Old and New Testaments. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a cornerstone of law in the New Covenant era, but it is originally a command from the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant era, the Israelites were obligated to love consisted only of their fellow Israelites. This is clear from the wording of the command: "Do not seek revenge or bear a **grudge against one of your people**, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." We have seen that the Israelites were not commanded to love their Canaanite neighbors. When this law is repeated in the New Covenant era, the old commandment becomes new. Because of the coming of Jesus and his work on the cross, we have a new mission that changes the face of the old commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Christ turns the spotlight on this command in Luke 10 and shows the change that had taken place with His coming:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37).

When the expert in the law asked Christ "Who is my neighbor?" he was not sincerely seeking to know and obey God, but rather to "justify" his cruel behavior towards others. Yet the question is a good one given Israel's divinely sanctioned bloody history with her neighbors. Christ's answer is that you are supposed to be "a neighbor" to whomever you come across. This is the polar opposite of God's command that we looked at in Deuteronomy 20 where he says, "...do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you" (v. 16b, 17).

Christ is not misinterpreting the Old Covenant command. He is bringing the command into the New Covenant phase of God's plan of redemption where it is given changes appropriate to what God is doing in the New Covenant era. The people of Israel were the (unbelieving)

people of God *gathered*.<sup>58</sup> **Israel's enemies were God's enemies.** That is they knew who God's enemies were and God directed them to hack them down. In the New Covenant era, this law to love our neighbors is very different. Our "neighbors" consist of anybody and everybody we bump up against. We (believers living in the New Covenant era) are the (believing) people of God *gathering*.<sup>59</sup> **God has not told the church who His eternal enemies are.** God has told us to go out and work at reconciling everyone—both His enemies and His future friends—to God rather than reconnecting them with the dirt! Our mission is to *gather* the true people of God from throughout the world by loving everyone as Christ loved us.

We must remember that David was an Israelite. When he prayed the War Psalms, he was praying as an Old Covenant Israelite who had a different holy definition of "neighbor" and a different holy command for behavior towards his enemies than you and I have today. Israel is not the church and the church is not Israel. God used Old Covenant Israel differently in His plan than He is currently using the church. This helps us understand how the command to love your neighbor could be so radically different under these two different covenants and for these two different peoples. In the New Covenant era, we are to love not just our closest neighbor, but also our furthest enemy. It is now an incredibly sinful act to live like an obedient Old Covenant Israelite. If I were to go and hack down my pagan neighbors because of their wicked false religion, I would be rebelling against God and breaking his law. But it was a God-glorifying act for an Israelite to do that very same thing in the Old Covenant era. Killing someone would be breaking the New Covenant law to love my neighbor. But my Old Covenant Israelite counterpart would not be violating Leviticus 19:18 in any way if that neighbor happened to be on God's hit list. When wicked idolaters persecute me and even threaten me with bodily harm, I am commanded by God to seek to bless them and do good to them (Romans 12:14-21), while an Old Covenant Israelite would have been in deep rebellion against God if he acted the way I am commanded by God to act today.

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<sup>58</sup> During the Old Testament and the Old Covenant era you do not find any clear teaching on evangelism or the taking of the gospel to the world. There were no missionaries in Israel and there was no great commission.

<sup>59</sup> It was a big difficulty for the disciples to grasp this concept. The very idea that the gospel was to be given to non-Jews was revolutionary (Acts 15:6-11). For Paul and John, this idea of the universality of the people of God was of paramount importance. See Ephesians 2:12-18 and Revelation 5:9-10.

Having seen the radical difference between God's command to Old Covenant Israel and His command to the church regarding neighbors and enemies should get us a step closer toward understanding the war Psalms.

### **Some Biblical Prayers Become Unbiblical if We Pray Them**

Many people approach Scripture, especially the prayers in Scripture, as generic prayers that exist simply to stir our hearts to love God more. Using the words of Scripture to stir your heart to greater love towards God is commendable. But we must do this with great care because some prayers in Scripture are inappropriate for us to pray. Sometimes there is a context to the words or a position that the person praying holds that makes the Psalm inappropriate and even dishonoring to God for us to pray. An example of this is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (John 17:2-5).

I cannot pray this prayer as if it is my own. I am not God's Son in the same way Jesus is. I was never granted authority over all people to give eternal life. I did not have glory before the world began. God did not give me a people out of this world. For me to pray this prayer as if it was my own would not only be inappropriate, it would be the unspeakable sin of a mere man making himself equal with God. Jesus could do this because He is the God-man. I am a terrible sinner saved by God's amazing grace. I am in this prayer, not as the speaker, but as one of the people God the Father gave to Jesus Christ. I will never be the person praying this prayer, but I will always be the person being prayed for by Christ in this prayer.

Consider Psalm 72 for a moment. This Psalm was written by Solomon; the son of king David. In this Psalm, Solomon is praying for himself and for his kingdom:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones

with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. <sup>1</sup>All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him (Psalm 72:1-11).

Solomon was the king of the nation of Israel. I am not. His job was to exercise God's judgment over the people of Israel, mine is to call people to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). His father was promised an everlasting dynasty of which he was a part (2 Samuel 7:8-16). Neither my father nor I have any such promise. This Psalm is Solomon's prayer, not mine. It has profound theology within it that affects me as it relates to my Lord Jesus Christ, but this prayer of Solomon is not and cannot be my prayer.

Although not all prayers in Scripture should be taken on the lips of the saints as their own, these biblical prayers are still inspired by the God of heaven and earth and they were godly prayers for those who originally spoke them. This raises the question, "Were the war psalms meant to be prayed by all of the saints or is their 'pray-ability' limited by the position of the person who originally prayed them?"

### **Am I David, King of Israel?**

The first thing you should ask yourself as you flip open your Bible to the book of Psalms and find yourself reading a war Psalm is, "Am I David, King of Israel?" If you answer "yes" to this question, please call your local mental health department and direct them to your house for a pick-up, because you now officially belong in a padded room. But, for the rest of us who answer "no" to this question, we should be reminded that in Psalm 109 David, not you or me, is the one who was praying. Let's consider how unique David's position really was. David, unlike you and me, was the great King over Israel. He was God's anointed (*messiah* or *christos*) who not only brought political power and prosperity to the Kingdom of Israel, but was promised an everlasting kingdom by God Himself:

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Now then, tell my servant David, This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:8-16).

If you read through the prophets you will find an expectation of a future David, or son of David. This Davidic person is to be the restorer of the fortunes of God's people. He is seen as the great hope of Israel:

My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever (Ezekiel 37:24-28; cf. Jeremiah 33:15-26).

As you read your Bible in the New Covenant era, these and many other hopeful passages about a restoration of David's Kingdom, complete with David himself shepherding his people, are somewhat obvious road-signs pointing to the Messiah that was to come. He was the King of God's chosen people; the one who brought them into an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity; and the one with whom God made a covenant to make his family an everlasting dynasty. This points to Jesus in the New

Testament who is said to be the King of His people; the one who brings spiritual peace and spiritual prosperity to His people; the everlasting priest and King over His people.

### **Putting the Puzzle Together**

So far we have found that not all of the prayers in Scripture are appropriate for you and I to pray. There are several reasons that this is true. First, if it is a prayer uttered by an Israelite concerning his enemies, then we must take into account that the Israelites had a different divinely commanded way to behave toward their enemies than we do on this side of the cross. Second, often there is a particular historical circumstance behind a prayer that we do not share with the person who originally uttered the prayer. Finally, the office of the person praying may be of such a different character that he can say things to God that you and I cannot. These have all been presented as separate thoughts. Now we are in the position of a child who has separated the pieces of a puzzle by color and shape but has not yet begun putting the puzzle together. Our job is to put the pieces of the puzzle together to make one coherent picture.

### **If I'm Not David, Then Who Is? The David/Jesus Connection**

The New Testament tells us that Jesus is the long awaited Davidic King about whom the prophets spoke. It is not that Jesus is actually David, but that David and Jesus have a typological relationship—David prefigured Jesus. The Prophets gave us hints of this but the writers of the New Testament give us clear testimony that Jesus is in fact the son of David that was to come. In Luke 1:31-33, the angel Gabriel is speaking to Mary. In this wonderfully hopeful passage, Gabriel clearly tells her that Jesus is the long awaited son of David and the eternal ruler that was to sit on the throne of David: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

The David/Jesus connection in the New Testament is not difficult to find. It is either directly stated as it was by the angel Gabriel above, or it is indirectly stated by a New Testament author taking the words of the Old Testament that applied to David and applying those words to Jesus. A clear example of the latter is found in Acts 4 where the disciples

take Psalm 2 and quote it as if it is speaking directly about Jesus and the events surrounding his death:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:23-28).

Notice that the disciples believed David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote Psalm 2. They believed that the Psalm actually referred to Jesus ("his Anointed One"), Herod and Pilate ("Kings of the earth...and rulers"), and the gentiles ("the nations" that "rage"). As we consider Psalm 2, we will find that the disciples used Psalm 2 in a very surprising way that will ultimately inform us of how we are to read the war Psalms.

Psalm 2 is a coronation Psalm. It celebrates the installation of a king over Israel. Here are the first 7 verses:

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your father (Psalm 2:1-7).

This Psalm has an historical setting. When the Psalmist (David) wrote about the nations, he thought of Philistia, not Rome. When he wrote about "kings of the earth" he most likely thought of the kings of the Moabites and the Arameans rather than Herod and Pilate. The nations and kings that were conspiring were the enemies of Israel in David's time and the Anointed One was David himself. What led the disciples to believe that this Psalm spoke about the installation of Jesus as Lord and King through his resurrection? What led them to interpret this

Psalm as one that referred to the enemies of Jesus who contributed to his crucifixion? I believe that what led them to this interpretation was that they understood “the Jesus connection”—that David prefigured Christ and therefore David’s situation in Psalm 2 also prefigured Christ’s situation.

### **Inspired Application of the War Psalms**

Now we are ready to examine how the writers of the New Testament applied the war Psalms. In the first chapter of the book of Acts, the disciples are in the upper room waiting and preparing for Pentecost. They conclude that they need to pick a new Apostle to fill the spot Judas left. As they turn to this task, they cite two war Psalms to describe their situation and to support their actions:

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, " 'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, " 'May another take his place of leadership.' Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." (Acts 1:15-22).

The first quotation, “May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it” is a quotation of Psalm 69:25. Psalm 69 is a Psalm of David. David is praying that God would rescue him from his many enemies that are seeking to kill him. Verse 25 is in the midst of the climax of the Psalm when David is fervently praying that God would take action:

May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share

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in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous (Psalm 69:22-28).

In this Psalm, King David is praying that God would wipe out his enemies. He prays that, as a result of God pouring out His wrath, his enemies would no longer be around to live in their land or dwell in their tents. The disciples grab this verse from Psalm 69 and rather than seeing themselves in the place of David and therefore being able to pray this Psalm as if they were the speaker, they understood "the Jesus connection." They saw that David prefigured Jesus as the great Messianic King. They see David's words concerning his enemies as applicable to Jesus and his enemy, Judas Iscariot.

The disciples do exactly the same thing with the second quotation that is drawn from Psalm 109:8. The context is essentially the same as that of Psalm 69. It is, once again, a Davidic Psalm in which David is praying that God would pour out His wrath on his enemies. David wants God to wipe his enemy (and the family of his enemy) from the face of the earth. In addition, David desires God to put another person in his adversary's "place of leadership" so that it would be as if his enemy never existed! The disciples take this cursing prayer of David and apply it to an enemy of Christ, Judas Iscariot. They use it to support their action to appoint another Apostle. The disciples are reading the war Psalms uniformly in the light of the special typological relationship between David and Jesus. Their application makes perfect sense once we understand "the Jesus connection."

Let's take a look at just one more example of a New Testament author using a war Psalm. In Romans 11, Paul quotes Psalm 69:23. Paul quotes this Davidic war Psalm in the midst of making the point that much of Israel has rejected the gospel and only a tiny remnant of Israel has ever embraced God's saving grace and mercy:

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever" (Romans 11:7-10).

There is something remarkable about Paul quoting a Davidic war psalm in this context. David was the king of the nation of Israel. When he

penned these words about his enemies, he was speaking about the many nations that surrounded his nation, who had their swords drawn and bows bent, ready to destroy Israel. When David prayed, he prayed as the king and representative of the nation of Israel. Therefore, David's prayer was on behalf of himself and on behalf of Israel. His enemies were Israel's enemies. In David's prayer, Israel is the good guy. Now, when Paul quotes this prayer of David, he uses these cursing words to apply to Israel. According to Paul's interpretation, the nation of Israel is the enemy that gets cursed! How are we to make sense of this?

Once again, the only way the New Testament use of the imprecatory Psalms makes any sense is if we see them in the light of the new and final King and the new and final Kingdom He brought into power with His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection. David was the king of ethnic Israel. Jesus is the king of spiritual Israel (Romans 9:6; Galatians 3:29). David prayed that God would curse the physical enemies of the physical kingdom of Israel. Paul interprets David's words in the light of the new King and new Kingdom to mean that the spiritual enemies of Jesus get cursed. Paul understands that the Jews who have rejected the Gospel are the enemies of Christ and His Kingdom and therefore David's words apply. The pieces of the puzzle now fit together and we can see the limited but extremely important application of the war Psalms.

### **So, When Can I Curse My Enemies?**

Charles Spurgeon, the amazing 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and thinker also wrestled with the war Psalms. His point of view is perhaps the most popular view people hold concerning the application of the war Psalms. In his usual colorful way, he tells us how and when he believes these Psalms might be prayed:

I cannot forbear the following little incident that occurred the other morning at family worship. I happened to be reading of the imprecatory Psalms, and as I paused to remark, my little boy, a lad of ten years, asked with some earnestness: "Father, do you think it right for a good man to pray for the destruction of his enemies like that?" and at the same time referred me to Christ as praying for his enemies. I paused a moment to know how to shape the reply so as to fully satisfy his inquiry, and then said, "My son, if an assassin should enter the house by night, and murder your mother, and then escape, and the sheriff and citizens were all out in pursuit, trying to catch him, would you not pray to God that they might succeed and arrest him, and that he might be brought to justice?" "Oh, yes!" said

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he, “but I never saw it so before. I did not know that that was the meaning of these psalms.” “Yes,” said I, “my son, the men against whom David prays were bloody men, men of falsehood and crime, enemies to the peace of society, seeking his own life, and unless they were arrested and their wicked devices defeated, many innocent persons must suffer.” The explanation perfectly satisfied his mind.<sup>60</sup>

Hopefully, after having examined so much Scripture, this explanation does not “perfectly satisfy your mind.” Spurgeon seems to be saying that we can curse our enemies as David did, when our enemies are *really bad*. We can pray for vengeance when we want our enemies brought to justice. We can pray that God would get our enemies when they kill our parents or when other innocent people might suffer. There are several problems with this point of view. Spurgeon’s view does not deal with the severity of cursing we find in the war Psalms—that the Psalmist wants his enemies to go straight to hell along with their families. It also does not deal with the radical nature of the New Testament command to love one’s enemies.

We need to return to the key questions posed in the beginning of this article: “Can we curse our enemies as David did without violating the command of Christ? Can we say to our enemies, ‘I hate you in Jesus’ name?’” The answer is an emphatic “No!” We are neither the King of theocratic Israel nor are we Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords. We are not in the position of Old Covenant Israel or King David. To fight against the nation of Israel and David was to become an enemy of God. Our enemies are not necessarily God’s enemies. We do not know who the eternal enemies of our Lord are, so we cannot pray or even quote the war Psalms in order to apply them to our enemies today. There will be a time in the future when Jesus will come in judgment. At that time His enemies will be revealed and judged. But in the New Covenant era, it is God’s job to bring His enemies to light and to justice, not mine. Until He is ready to destroy His enemies, it is our job to follow Jesus in His love for His enemies and in His humility and suffering—not in His righteous wrath.

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<sup>60</sup> As cited in James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons From the Imprecatory Psalms*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1991), 90.