

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF EXODUS

by

Charles H. MacIntosh

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F. H. Revell

Exodus 20

It is of the utmost importance to understand the true character and object of the moral law, as set forth in this chapter. There is a tendency in the mind to confound the principles of law and grace, so that neither the one nor the other can be rightly understood. Law is shorn of its stern and unbending majesty; and grace is robbed of all its divine attractions. God's holy claims remain unanswered, and the sinner's deep and manifold necessities remain unreached by the anomalous system framed by those who attempt to mingle law and grace.

In point of fact, they can never be made to coalesce, for they are as distinct as any two things can be. Law sets forth what man ought to be; grace exhibits what God is. How can these ever be wrought up into one system? How can the sinner ever be saved by a system made up of half law, half grace? Impossible. It must be either the one or the other.

The law has sometimes been termed "the transcript of the mind of God." This definition is entirely defective. Were we to term it a transcript of the mind of God as to what man ought to be, we should be nearer the truth. If I am to regard the ten commandments as the transcript of the mind of God, then, I ask, is there nothing in the mind of God save "**thou shalt**" and "**thou shalt not?**" Is there no grace? No mercy? No loving kindness? Is God not to manifest what He is? Is He not to tell out the deep secrets of that love which dwells in His bosom? Is there nought in the divine character but stern requirement and prohibition? Were this so, we should have to say, "God is law" instead of "**God is love.**" But, blessed be His name, there is more in His heart than could ever be wrapped up in the "ten words" uttered on the fiery mount.

If I want to see what God is, I must look at Christ; "**for in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the godhead bodily**" (Colossians 2:9). "**The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ**" (John 1:17).

Assuredly there was a measure of truth in the law. It contained the truth as to what man ought to be. Like everything else emanating from God, it was perfect so far as it went - perfect for the object for which it was administered; but that object was not, by any means, to unfold, in the view of guilty sinners, the nature and character of God.

There was no grace - no mercy.

- **“He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy”** (Hebrews 10:28).
- **“The man that doeth these things shall live by them”** (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 10:5).
- **“Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them”** (Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10).

This was not grace. Indeed, mount Sinai was not the place to look for any such thing. There the Lord revealed Himself in awful majesty, amid blackness, darkness, tempest, thunderings, and lightnings. These were not the attendant circumstances of an economy of grace and mercy; but they were well suited to one of truth and righteousness; and the law was that and nothing else.

In the law God sets forth what a man ought to be, and pronounces a curse upon him if he is not that.

But then a man finds, when he looks at himself in the light of the law, that he actually is the very thing which the law condemns. How then is he to get life by it? It proposes life and righteousness as the ends to be attained, by keeping it; but it proves, at the very outset, that we are in a state of death and unrighteousness. We want the very things at the beginning which the law proposes to be gained at the end. How, therefore, are we to gain them? In order to do what the law requires, I must have life; and in order to be what the law requires, I must have righteousness; and if I have not both the one and the other, I am “cursed.” But the fact is, I have neither. What am I to do?

This is the question. Let those who **“desire to be teachers of the law”** furnish an answer. Let them furnish a satisfactory reply to an upright conscience, bowed down under the double sense of the spirituality and inflexibility of the law and its own hopeless carnality.

The truth is, as the apostle teaches us, **“the law entered that the offence might abound”** (Romans 5:20). This shows us, very distinctly, the real object of the law. It came in by the way in order to set forth the exceeding sinfulness of sin. (I Corinthians 7:13).

It was, in a certain sense, like a perfect mirror let down from Heaven to reveal to man his moral derangement.

- if I present myself, with deranged hair, before a mirror, it shows me the derangement, but does not set it right.
- if I measure a crooked wall, with a perfect plumb-line, it reveals the crookedness, but does not remove it.
- if I take out a lamp on a dark night, it reveals to me all the hindrances and disagreeables in the way, but it does not remove them.

Moreover, the mirror, the plumb-line, and the lamp, do not create the evils which they severally point out; they neither create nor remove, but simply reveal.

Thus is it with the law; it does not create the evil in man’s heart, neither does it remove it; but, with unerring accuracy, it reveals it.

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Yea, I had not known sin but by the law; for I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Romans 7:7).

He does not say that he would not have had “lust.” No; but merely that **“he had not known it.”** The “lust” was there; but he was in the dark about it until the law, as **“the candle of the Almighty,”** shone in upon the dark chambers of his heart and revealed the evil that was there. Like a man in a dark room, who may be surrounded with dust and confusion, but he cannot see ought thereof by reason of the darkness. Let the beams of the sun dart in upon him, and he quickly perceives all. Do the sunbeams create the dust? Surely not. The dust is there, and they only detect and reveal it. This is a simple illustration of the effect of the law. It judges man’s character and condition. It proves him to be a sinner and shuts him up under the curse. It comes to judge what he is, and curses him if he is not what it tells him he ought to be.

It is, therefore, a manifest impossibility that any one can get life and righteousness by that which can only curse him; and unless the condition of the sinner, and the character of the law are totally changed, it can do nought else but curse him. It makes no allowance for infirmities, and knows nothing of sincere, though imperfect, obedience. Were it to do so, it would not be what it is, **“holy, just, and good.”**

It is just because the law is what it is, that the sinner cannot get life by it. If he could get life by it, it would not be perfect, or else he would not be a sinner. It is impossible that a sinner can get life by a perfect law, for inasmuch as it is perfect, it must needs condemn him.

Its absolute perfectness makes manifest and seals man’s absolute ruin and condemnation. **“Therefore by deeds of law shall no flesh living be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:20). He does not say, “by the law is sin,” but only **“the knowledge of sin.”** **“For until the law, sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law”** (Romans 5:13). Sin was there, and it only needed law to develop it in the form of “transgression.” It is as if I say to my child, “you must not touch that knife.” My very prohibition reveals the tendency in his heart to do his own will. It does not create the tendency, but only reveals it.

The apostle John says that **“sin is lawlessness”** (I John 3:4).

The word “transgression” does not develop the true idea of the Spirit in this passage. In order to have “transgression” I must have a definite rule or line laid down. *Transgression means a passing across a prohibited line;* such a line I have in the law. I take any one of its prohibitions, such as, **“thou shalt not kill,” “thou shalt not commit adultery,” “thou shalt not steal.”** Here, I have a rule or line set before me; but I find I have within me the very principles against which these prohibitions are expressly directed. Yea, the very fact of my being told not to commit murder, shows that I have murder in my nature. There would be no necessity to tell me not to do a thing which I had no tendency to do; but the exhibition of God’s will, as to what I ought to be, makes manifest the tendency of my will to be what I ought not. This is plain enough, and is in full keeping with the whole of the apostolic reasoning on the point.

Many, however, will admit that we cannot get life by the law; but they maintain, at the same time, that the law is our rule of life.

Now, the apostle declares that **“as many as are of works of law are under the curse”** (Galatians 3:10). It matters not who they are, if they occupy the ground of law, they are, of necessity, under the curse.

A man may say, “I am regenerate, and, therefore, not exposed to the curse.” This will not do. If regeneration does not take one off the ground of law, it cannot take him beyond the range of the curse of the law. If the Christian be under the former, he is, of necessity, exposed to the latter. But what has the law to do with regeneration? Where do we find anything about it in Exodus 20:8?

The law has but one question to put to a man - a brief, solemn, pointed question, namely, “Are you what you ought to be?”

If he answer in the negative, it can but hurl its terrible anathema at him and slay him. And who will so readily and emphatically admit that, in himself, he is anything but what he ought to be, as the really regenerate man? Wherefore, if he is under the law, he must, inevitably, be under the curse. The law cannot possibly lower its standard: nor yet amalgamate with grace. Men do constantly seek to lower its standard; they feel that they cannot get up to it, and they, therefore, seek to bring it down to them; but the effort is in vain: it stands forth in all its purity, majesty, and stern inflexibility, and will not accept a single hair's breadth short of perfect obedience; and where is the man, regenerate or unregenerate, that can undertake to produce that?

It will be said, “We have perfection in Christ.” True; but that is not by the law, but by grace; and we cannot possibly confound the two economies.

Scripture largely and distinctly teaches that we are not justified by the law; nor is the law our rule of life. That which can only curse can never justify; and that which can only kill can never be a rule of life. As well might a man attempt to make a fortune by a deed of bankruptcy filed against him.

If my reader will turn to Acts 15, he will see how the attempt to put Gentile believers under the law, as a rule of life, was met by the Holy Ghost.

“There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

This was nothing else than the hiss of the old serpent, making itself heard in the dark and depressing suggestion of those early legalists. But let us see how it was met by the mighty energy of the Holy Ghost, and the unanimous voice of the twelve apostles and the whole Church.

“And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago, God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear,” - what?

Was it the requirements and the curses of the law of Moses? No: blessed be God, these are not what He would have falling on the ears of helpless sinners. Hear what then? **“SHOULD HEAR THE WORD OF THE GOSPEL, AND BELIEVE.”** This was what suited the nature and character of God. He never would have troubled men with the dismal accents of requirement and prohibition. These Pharisees were not His messengers; far from it. They were not the bearers of glad tidings, nor the publishers of peace, and therefore, their “feet” were ought but “beautiful” in the eyes of One who only delights in mercy.

“Now, therefore,” continues the apostle, **“why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”**

This was strong, earnest language. God did not want **“to put a yoke upon the neck”** of those whose hearts had been set free by the Gospel of peace. He would rather exhort them to stand fast in the liberty of Christ, and not be **“entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”**

He would not send those whom He had received to His bosom of love, to be terrified by the **“blackness, and darkness, and tempest,”** of **“the mount that might be touched.”** How could we ever admit the thought that those whom God had received in grace He would rule by law? Impossible.

“We believe,” says Peter, **“that through the GRACE OF THE LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved even as they.”** Both the Jews, who had received the law, and the Gentiles, who never had, were now to be **“saved through grace.”**

And not only were they *to be “saved” by grace*, but they were *to “stand” in grace*, (Romans 5:2) and *to “grow in grace”* (II Peter 3:18).

To teach anything else was to **“tempt God.”** Those Pharisees were subverting the very foundations of the Christian faith; and so are all those who seek to put believers under the law. There is no evil or error more abominable in the sight of the Lord than legalism. Harken to the strong language - the accents of righteous indignation - which fell from the Holy Ghost, in reference to those teachers of the law: **“I would they were even cut off which trouble you”** (Galatians 5:12).

And, let me ask, are the thoughts of the Holy Ghost changed, in reference to this question? Has it ceased to be a tempting of God to place the yoke of legality upon a sinner’s neck? Is it now in accordance with His gracious will that the law should be read out in the ears of sinners? Let my reader reply to these enquiries in the light of the fifteenth of Acts and the Epistle to the Galatians. These scriptures, were there no other, are amply sufficient to prove that God never intended that the “Gentiles should hear the word” of the law. Had He so intended, He would, assuredly, have “made choice” of some one to proclaim it in their ears. But no; when He sent forth His “fiery law,” He spoke only in one tongue; but when He proclaimed the glad tidings of salvation, through the Blood of the Lamb, He spoke in the language **“of every nation under heaven.”** He spoke in such a way as that **“every man in his own tongue wherein he was born,”** might hear the sweet story of grace. (Acts 2:1-11).

Further, when He was giving forth, from mount Sinai, the stern requirements of the covenant of works, He addressed Himself exclusively to one people. His voice was only heard within the narrow enclosures of the Jewish nation; but when, on the plains of Bethlehem, “**the angel of the Lord**” declared “**good tidings of great joy,**” he added those characteristic words, “**which shall be to all people.**”

And, again, when the risen Christ was sending forth His heralds of salvation, His commission ran thus, “**Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature**” (Mark 16:15; Luke 2:10).

The mighty tide of grace which had its source in the bosom of God, and its channel in the Blood of the Lamb, was designed to rise, in the resistless energy of the Holy Ghost, far above the narrow enclosures of Israel, and roll through the length and breadth of a sin-stained world. “**Every creature**” must hear, “**in his own tongue,**” the message of peace, the word of the Gospel, the record of salvation, through the Blood of the Cross.

Finally, that nothing might be lacking to prove to our poor legal hearts that mount Sinai was not, by any means, the spot where the deep secrets of the bosom of God were told out, the Holy Ghost has said, both by the mouth of a prophet and an apostle, “**How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the Gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!**” (Isaiah 3:7; Romans 10:15).

But of those who sought to be teachers of the law the same Holy Ghost has said, “**I would they were even cut off that trouble you.**”

Thus, then, it is obvious that the law is neither the ground of life to the sinner nor the rule of life to the Christian. Christ is both the one and the other. He is our life and He is our rule of life. The law can only curse and slay.

Christ is our life and righteousness.

- He became a curse for us by hanging on a tree.
- He went down into the place where the sinner lay - into the place of death and judgment - and having, by His death, entirely discharged all that was or could be against us.
- He became, in resurrection, the source of life and the ground of righteousness to all who believe in His name.

Having thus life and righteousness in Him, we are called to walk, not merely as the law directs, but to “**walk even as he walked.**” It will hardly be deemed needful to assert that it is directly contrary to Christian ethics to kill, commit adultery, or steal. But were a Christian to shape his way according to these commands, or according to the entire Decalogue, would he yield the rare and delicate fruits which the Epistle to the Ephesians sets forth? Would the ten commandment ever cause a thief to give up, stealing, and go to work that he might have to give? Would they ever transform a thief into a laborious and liberal man? Assuredly not.

The law says, “**thou shalt not steal;**” but does it say, “**go and give to him that needeth**” - go feed, clothe, and bless your enemy - go gladden by your benevolent feelings and your beneficent acts the heart of him who only and always seeks your hurt? By no means; and yet, were I under the law, as a rule, it could only curse me and slay me. How is this, when the standard in the New Testament is so much higher? Because am weak, and the law gives me no strength and shows me no mercy.

- The law demands strength from one that has none, and curses him if he cannot display it.
- The Gospel gives strength to one that has none, and blesses him in the exhibition of it.
- The law proposes life as the end of obedience.
- The Gospel gives life as the only proper ground of obedience.

But that I may not weary the reader with arguments, let me ask if the law be, indeed, the rule of a believer's life, where are we to find it so presented in the New Testament?

The inspired apostle evidently had no thought of its being the rule when he penned the following words: “**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God**” (Galatians 6:15, 16). What “rule?” The law? No, but the “**new creation.**” Where shall we find this in Exodus 20? It speaks not a word about “**new creation.**” On the contrary, it addresses itself to man as he is, in his natural or old-creation state, and puts him to the test as to what he is really able to do.

Now if the law were the rule by which believers are to walk, why does the apostle pronounce his benediction on those who walk by another rule altogether? Why does he not say, “as many as walk according to the rule of the ten commandments?” Is it not evident, from this one passage, that the Church of God has a higher rule by which to walk? Unquestionably. The ten commandments, though forming, as all true Christians admit, a part of the canon of inspiration, could never be the rule of life to one who has, through infinite grace, been introduced into the new creation - one who has received new life, in Christ.

But some may ask, “Is not the law perfect? And, if perfect, what more would you have?” The law is divinely perfect. Yea, it is the very perfection of the law which causes it to curse and slay those who are not perfect - if they attempt to stand before it. “**The law is spiritual, but I am carnal.**” It is utterly impossible to form an adequate idea of the infinite perfectness and spirituality of the law. But then this perfect law coming in contact with fallen humanity - this spiritual law coming in contact with “**the carnal mind,**” could only “**work wrath**” and “**enmity**” (Romans 4:15; Romans 8:7).

Why? Is it because the law is not perfect? No, but because it is, and man is a sinner. If man were perfect, he would carry out the law in all its spiritual perfectness; and even in the case of true believers, though they still carry about with them an evil nature, the apostle teaches us “*that the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit*” (Romans 8:4). “*He that loveth another hath fulfilled the law*” - “*love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law*” (Romans 13:8-10).

If I love a man, I shall not steal his property - nay, I shall seek to do him all the good I can. All this is plain and easily understood by the spiritual mind; but it leaves entirely untouched the question of the law, whether as the ground of life to a sinner or the rule of life to the believer.

If we look at the law, in its two grand divisions, it tells a man to love God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind; and to love his neighbour as himself. This is the sum of the law. This, and not a tittle less, is what the law demands. But where has this demand ever been responded to by any member of Adam's fallen posterity? Where is the man who could say he loves God after such a fashion? "**The carnal mind** (i.e., the mind which we have by nature) **is enmity against God.**" Man hates God and His ways.

God came, in the Person of Christ, and showed Himself to man - showed Himself, not in the overwhelming brightness of His majesty, but in all the charm and sweetness of perfect grace and condescension. What was the result? Man hated God. "**Now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father**" (John 15:24). But, it must be said, "Man ought to love God." No doubt, and he deserves death and eternal perdition if he does not. But can the law produce this love in man's heart? Was that its design? By no means, "**for the law worketh wrath.**"

The law finds man in a state of enmity against God; and without ever altering that state - for that was not its province - it commands him to love God with all his heart, and curses him if he does not. It was not the province of the law to alter or improve man's nature; nor yet could it impart any power to carry out its righteous demands.

- It said "**This do, and thou shalt live.**"

- It commanded man to love God.

- It did not reveal what God was to man, even in his guilt and ruin; but it told man what he ought to be toward God.

This was dismal work. It was not the unfolding of the powerful attractions of the divine character, producing in man true repentance toward God, melting his icy heart, and elevating his soul in genuine affection and worship. No: it was an inflexible command to love God; and, instead of producing love, it "**worked wrath;**" not because God ought not to be loved, but because man was a sinner.

Again, "**Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**"

Can "**the natural man**" do this? Does he love his neighbour as himself? Is this the principle which obtains in the chambers of commerce, the exchanges, the banks, the marts, the fairs, and the markets of this world? Alas! no. Man does not love his neighbour as he loves himself. No doubt he ought: and if he were right, he would. But, then, he is all wrong - totally wrong - and unless he is "**born again**" of the Word and the Spirit of God, he cannot "**see . . . [nor] enter the kingdom of God.**"

The law cannot produce this new birth. It kills "**the old man,**" but does not, and cannot, create "the new."

As an actual fact we know that the Lord Jesus Christ embodied, in His glorious Person, both God and our neighbour, inasmuch as He was, according to the foundation-truth of the Christian religion, **“God manifest in the flesh.”** How did man treat Him? Did he love Him with all his heart, or as himself? The very reverse. He crucified Him between two thieves, having previously preferred a murderer and a robber to that blessed One who had gone about doing good - who had come forth from the eternal dwelling-place of light and love - Himself the very living personification of that light and love - whose bosom had ever heaved with purest sympathy with human need - whose hand had ever been ready to dry the sinner’s tears and alleviate his sorrows. Thus we stand and gaze upon the Cross of Christ, and behold in it an unanswerable demonstration of the fact that it is not within the range of man’s nature or capacity to keep the law. *

*** For further exposition of the law, and also of the doctrine of the Sabbath, the reader is referred to a tract, entitled “A Scriptural Inquiry into the True Nature of the Sabbath, the Law, and the Christian Ministry. Posted in Appendix One.**

It is peculiarly interesting to the spiritual mind, after all that has passed before us, to observe the relative position of God and the sinner at the close of this memorable chapter.

“And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel . . . an altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt-offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name, I WILL COME UNTO THEE, and I WILL BLESS THEE. And if thou wilt make an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon” (Ver. 22, 26).

Here we find man not in the position of a doer, but of a worshipper; and this, too, at the close of Exodus 20. How plainly this teaches us that the atmosphere of Mount Sinai is not that which God would have the sinner breathing; that it is not the proper meeting place between God and man. **“In all places where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.”** How unlike the terrors of the fiery mount is that spot where the Lord records His name, whither He **“comes”** to **“bless”** His worshipping people!

But, further, God will meet the sinner at an altar without a hewn stone or a step - a place of worship which requires no human workmanship to erect, or human effort to approach.

The former could only pollute, and the latter could only display human **“nakedness.”** Admirable type of the meeting-place where God meets the sinner now, even the Person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, where all the claims of law, of justice, and of conscience, are perfectly answered!

Man has, in every age, and in every clime, been prone, in one way or another, to **“lift up his tool”** in the erection of his altar, or to approach thereto by steps of his own making. But the issue of all such attempts has been **“pollution”** and **“nakedness.”** **“We all do fade as a leaf, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags?”**

Who will presume to approach God clad in a garment of “**filthy rags?**” or who will stand to worship with a revealed “**nakedness?**” What can be more preposterous than to think of approaching God in a way which necessarily involves either pollution or nakedness? And yet thus it is in every case in which human effort is put forth to open the sinner’s way to God. Not only is there no need of such effort, but defilement and nakedness are stamped upon it. God has come down so very near to the sinner, even in the very depths of his ruin, that there is no need for his lifting up the tool of legality, or ascending the steps of self-righteousness yea, to do so, is but to expose his uncleanness and his nakedness.

Such are the principles with which the Holy Ghost closes this most remarkable section of inspiration. May they be indelibly written upon our hearts, that so we may more clearly and fully understand the essential difference between LAW and GRACE.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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