

# **GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES**

A Comprehensive View of God's Great Plan from  
Eternity to Eternity Illustrated with Chart

By

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## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE AGE OF LAW**

In our last lesson we contrasted God's unconditional covenant of grace made with Abraham and the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai, emphasizing especially the grace of God in His covenant relationship with Abraham and his earthly and heavenly seed.

Today, as we amplify the theme — law and grace in contrast — we shall try to find out what really came to pass during the Age of Law. In other words, our last lesson, dealing primarily with the covenant of grace, showed us what is in the heart of God; today, as we look more closely at the covenant of works, we shall see something of what is in the heart of man.

As has already been pointed out, the period of time from Abraham to Christ is usually divided into two dispensations, each following the same general course as those which preceded and those which were to follow:

- (1) The Age of Promise, referring to God's promise to Abraham; sin and failure on the part of Abraham's descendants; 400 years' bondage in Egypt — a new trial, failure, judgment; and
- (2) the Age of Law; sin and failure on Israel's part, culminating in the crucifixion of their Messiah; and the dispersion of Israel among the nations — a new trial, failure, judgment.

For our purpose in these studies, however, as we have stated before, we have chosen to call God's dealings with Abraham a preface to the Law of Moses. (See chart). We are thinking in terms of the great contrast between that which is in the heart of God toward sinful man and that which is in the heart of sinful man, both concerning his attitude toward God and his estimate of himself.

Let us remember first of all that which we have already had pointed out: God did not abrogate His covenant of grace made with Abraham 430 years before the law was given. (See Galatians 3:17).

From the beginning God's way with sinful man has been by the way of sacrifice — all of grace. Nor was God making an experiment when He tested man under the law. He knew from the beginning what was in man. But unregenerate man ever refuses to believe God, or to see himself a ruined sinner apart from the grace of God. Therefore, God allowed man to make the experiment under the law, to show him his need.

Cain represents the natural man. He brought the fruit of his own works as an offering unto the Lord, even though God had told him to offer the animal sacrifice.

**“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain”** (Hebrews 11:4).

Since he knew that it was the shed blood of the innocent victim that pointed on to the Lamb of Calvary then Cain also had every opportunity to know what God required. But did he accept God's way? Did he acknowledge himself a sinner, needing a Saviour? No, like every other unregenerate man who has tried in vain to approach God on his own merit, Cain brought the works of his hands. But Cain had no righteousness of his own. Man as touching righteousness is always a total failure! And God knew before He let man pass through the trial of law that man would fail.

### **“Wherefore Then Serveth The Law?”**

To find the answer to the question, **“Wherefore then serveth the law?”** we need to read Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. In Galatians 3:19 he asks this very question. Then he proceeds to answer it, as he is inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. Turn to this brief, yet profound epistle and read every word carefully.

**“Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed (Christ) should come . . . But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith”** (Galatians 3:19-24).

**“The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.”**

Today school is made attractive for our children, but Paul wrote these words at a time when school was “all work and no play.”

Even when I was a lad, I went to school under the old English schoolmaster who wielded a big stick. He was stern; he was exacting. But let me tell you, my friend, there is no schoolmaster as stern as the law of God. If a man seeks to work for his own salvation by obedience to God's holy law, then let him obey in every iota. Let him never waver once from God's high and holy standard; for God says: **“Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all”** (James 2:10). He has broken, transgressed, God's law. And the law demands perfect obedience.

Only One has ever kept that law. **“When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons”** (Galatians 4:4, 5).

The Lord Jesus Christ could and did keep the law because He was holy, because He was God. But you cannot keep the law, my brother; I cannot; we are sinners. The law is a **“schoolmaster”** to lead us unto Christ. It reveals to us the blackness of our sin and our need of Calvary, but it can do no more.

The law is like a mirror. You look in the mirror to see the dust and grime on your face, but you do not wash yourself with the mirror. You look into the mirror of God's holy law, and there you see your defilement and sin that keep you from measuring up to God's standard, but you wash your garments white in the blood of Calvary's Lamb if you wash them at all!

The law can only show what is in the heart of man.

**“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19, 20).

**“Wherefore then serveth the law?”** It is a schoolmaster, a mirror, as it were, to reveal sin, to show a guilty, condemned world its need of a Saviour.

### **The Law — Israel's Choice**

When Israel reached Sinai in their wilderness wanderings, God rehearsed His ways with them — ways of grace. He desired to continue to deal with His people in grace, but Israel had gone far from the path of their father, Abraham, far from the walk of faith. And Israel chose law. It was the greatest mistake they had made hitherto.

Turn to the nineteenth chapter of Exodus and read the record.

God speaks to Israel, rehearsing His ways of mercy and guidance, in spite of their murmurings:

**“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.”**

Israel had been stiff-necked, utterly unworthy. But God, on the ground of His covenant with Abraham, had been dealing with them in grace.

- Had He not delivered them from Egyptian bondage?
- Had He not saved them from the destroying sword of the death angel?
- Had He not led them through the Red Sea on dry ground?
- Had He not given them manna to eat and water from the flinty rock?

Israel had not deserved such mercy; it was all of unmingled grace. But Israel had become a self-righteous people, ignorant of God's holiness and their own sin. They thought God had been dealing with them on their own merits. And instead of listening to God's voice, they undertook the most presumptuous vows ever known to man.

Look at Exodus 19:5 where God said to Israel, after He had rehearsed His ways with them:

**“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant (the Abrahamic covenant — all of grace), then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.”**

God thus assured them of what they might yet be if they would hearken unto His **“voice.”**

And note Israel's presumption:

**“All the people answered together”** — it was unanimous — **“All that the Lord hath spoken we will do”** — not “we will try to do” or “we will hope to do,” but **“we will do.”**

In abandonment of the holy promise of a holy covenant, Israel chose **“their covenant”** for God's covenant, a covenant of works for a covenant of grace, a covenant of death for a covenant of life.

In this choice Israel showed their ignorance of the holiness of God; they did not realize that He could not be satisfied with less than absolute perfection, perfect obedience, under law. Moreover, in this choice Israel showed their ignorance of themselves; they did not know the weakness and sin of their own hearts. Thus it always is with self-righteous man.

Had Israel known God and themselves, they would have remained under the Abrahamic covenant. But they chose the law. And from that moment God's attitude toward them changed.

A new dispensation began, with what result? The story we know very well.

### **Law Separates — Grace Makes Nigh**

Read on in the record to see the immediate result of Israel's choice:

**“The Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I come to thee in a thick cloud”** (Exodus 19:9). God now veiled Himself **“in a thick cloud”**; not so when He talked with Abraham.

When a man approaches God on any ground other than grace, the Lord veils Himself! He reveals Himself in grace! He revealed Himself nearly two thousand years ago in the person of His Son, our Saviour, who was the very embodiment of grace. (See John 1:14, 17, 18).

To Moses God said at Sinai:

**“Thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about”** the mount. **“Whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death”** (Exodus 19:12, 13).

Compare this scene with that of the Lord God as He bore His people “**on eagles' wings**” (verse 4).

As the mother eagle bears the little ones on her wings, so the Lord alone had led them and dealt graciously with them. But now the law separated them from a holy God. Only grace makes nigh!

The threat of death for disobedience, a quaking of the mount, the sound of the trumpet struck terror to the hearts of a guilty people.

“**So terrible was the sight, that Moses** (even Moses, the man of God) **said, I exceedingly fear and quake**” (Hebrews 12:21). Compare with this the word of the Lord to Abraham: “**Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward**” (Genesis 15:1). Is this the same God? Yes, but Israel had not the faith of Abraham. For Abraham there was grace; for him there was the quieting of fears; for Israel there was judgment; there was trembling; there was fear.

*The law separates, my friend; grace makes nigh.*

Before Israel under the law God veiled Himself in “**a thick darkness.**” But in Christ there is light! Thank God! Our salvation reveals to us “**the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ**” (II Corinthians 4:6).

Our salvation does not depend upon our own resolutions, our own works, our own self-righteousness! In the days of Moses, as a result of the giving of the law, “**the people . . . stood afar off**” (Exodus 20:18). “**In Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ**” (Ephesians 2:13).

### **The Law — Then Calvary**

The law prepared the way for Calvary's Cross. It revealed to a guilty people their sin. God knew their need; and He was determined to bless Israel in spite of their sin. But first He had to get their eyes on the altar, the ground of sacrifice.

Turn to Exodus 20:24-26, and read the Word of the Lord.

The altar where Israel was to worship Him was not to be “**of hewn stone.**” No altar made by human hands can ever be the basis of the relationship of man to God. “**No tool,**” no works of man, had any part in the altar where sinful Israel could meet a holy God! Calvary was all God's work, my brother. “**No man taketh my life from me,**” the Lord Jesus said. He came to die; and He finished the work of redemption!

“**Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar,**” spake the Lord God. Nor can you or I take one step up to find God. He had to come all the way from heaven down to where you and I are, in order to save us, to take our feet out of the miry clay, and set them upon a Rock. No, salvation is not wrought partly by God and partly by man. It is all of grace.

A rich young ruler went to the Lord Jesus one day, and asked, “**Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” (Luke 18:18).

Why did the Lord answer him, saying, “**Thou knowest the commandments?**”

Because he was meeting the young man on his own ground. He had asked, “**What shall I do?**” And Christ told him, not the way of life — by grace — in this instance; He told him what a man must do to be saved under the law — keep the commandments.

Then Jesus, to convict the young man of his sin and need of a Saviour, probed very deeply into his heart. “**Sell all that thou hast, and distribute to the poor,**” He said, “**and come, follow me.**”

The very spirit of the law is love for one's neighbor; but the rich young ruler was self-deceived. He had not kept all the commandments. And if he had been open to conviction, he would not have gone away “**sorrowful.**”

If you are asking today, my friend, “**What shall I do to inherit eternal life?**” then keep the commandments; turn neither to the right hand nor to the left! But do not be self-deceived. You cannot keep the commandments. You are a sinner. Look away to Calvary, and there you will see the only One who ever kept God's holy law. And because He kept it for you, He offers you salvation as a free gift. The work of redemption He has done. “**It is finished!**”

### **The Law Hidden In The Ark**

When the rich young ruler deceived himself by thinking he had kept all the commandments of God, he doubtless referred to the Ten Commandments, which set forth the summary of the whole Law of Moses. They represent the law in brief, though many pages in the Word of God are given to the explanation and interpretation of the civil, the moral, and the ceremonial law.

Since the Ten Commandments are the substance of the law, it is important to note where God told Moses to put them.

In Exodus 25:10-22 we read of “**the pattern**” of the golden covered Ark of the Covenant, over which was placed the mercy seat of pure gold. Twice in these verses we read that God told Moses to put “**the testimony**” in the ark.

Deuteronomy 10:1-5 tells the story in detail.

Throughout Old Testament times, first in the tabernacle and later in the temple, “**the tables of the covenant**” (Hebrews 9:4) were kept hidden from the view of Israel in the ark.

And again, the ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest could enter, once a year, not without blood.

The tables of stone hidden in the ark speak to us of two very significant facts:

- (1) The necessity for removing the law; and
- (2) the manner in which it was to be removed.

God at the beginning saw this necessity; and He foreshadowed the removal of the law by hiding this “**ministration of death**” (II Corinthians 3:7) in the ark, a type of Christ. Moses saw the danger of bringing the law into the camp when Israel was worshipping the golden calf, because it was “**a ministration of death.**”

Since they were “**the tables of the covenant,**” neither God nor Israel could set them aside; the covenant could not be disannulled. God was bound to punish disobedience; Israel was bound to obedience if she was to escape the curse of a broken law. This covenant of the law was dispensed at the hands of angels (Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2); angels were the mediators between God and Israel; and, reverently speaking, even God could not set the law aside. But knowing that Israel could not keep the law, God foreknew that He would come down to earth, keep the law Himself for Israel and a sinning world, and remove its curse in His death on the cross.

This is the symbolism of the law hidden in the ark!

But let us look further at this wonderful truth.

- The ark made of shittim wood speaks to us of the humanity of Jesus;
- The gold which covered the wood within and without speaks to us of His deity.

Within His heart there was no sin; without, His walk was above reproach! Over the ark was the mercy seat of pure gold, with the cherubim all of gold looking down on the sprinkled blood. The cherubim in the Scriptures are associated with the justice and the holiness of God. But there was no sword in the hands of the cherubim above the mercy seat as at the Garden of Eden. Why? Because they were looking down upon the sprinkled blood. That is why this covering of the ark could be called a mercy seat.

Only because Christ died to pay the penalty of a broken law, can God be both “**just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus**” (Romans 3:26). In Him “**mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each, other**” (Psalm 85:10).

God dwelt between the cherubim in the Shekinah Glory. But the law, “**the ministration of death,**” was hidden in the ark, under the blood.

Do you not see, my dear friend, that all this pointed to Christ?

God knew that there was no mercy in the law. He knew also that Israel could not keep it. Therefore, He had an ark made, to shut from view this covenant of death until it could be removed — until One could be found who could fulfill the law, bearing its curse, and meeting its vengeance.

The ark kept the tables of stone unbroken, even as Christ kept the law unbroken. He came not to destroy, but to fulfill His holy law. **“Made of a woman, made under the law,”** He **“hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree”** (Galatians 4:4; 3:13).

God did not lower His holy standard. He did not disannul His law. Such an act would have been a violation of His covenant. But God foreknew, foreordained, and foreshadowed the manner in which He Himself would one day fulfill, vindicate, and magnify His holy law. He alone could say that He loved the law with all His heart. He kept every commandment! Then He offered Himself as a sacrifice **“once for all,”** bearing in His body on the tree all the failures, all the sin, and all the guilt of the human race.

Are you vainly struggling to keep the commandments of God's law, my brother? It will be of no avail. Why not seek the ark of safety, and accept the grace of God? **“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth”** (Romans 10:4).

### **“Christ Is The End Of The Law”**

Earlier in this study for today we read from Galatians 3:19-24 these words: **“The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.”** But let us read on; verse 25 speaks plainly: **“After that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”**

*Just at this point hundreds in professing Christendom pervert the Word of God.*

Either in ignorance or in stubborn legalism, they try to impose the bondage of the law upon Christians who have been freed from the law by the grace of God. I refer especially to the observance of the seventh day Sabbath, as well as to the confusion that exists among evangelical Christians regarding the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day.

**“After that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”**

Do you remember how you felt during your school days when the holiday season came, and you were no longer under the disciplining hand of that stern schoolmaster? To be out from under the correcting rod meant liberty. So it is for the believer in Christ Jesus. The law shows us our need of a Saviour; but it is Christ who delivers us from its stern demands.

Legalists teach that the ceremonial law as represented by the sacrifices has been done away, but not the moral law which was engraven on tables of stone. But Paul does not teach this doctrine, and Paul wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God!

In II Corinthians 3:7-11 he tells us that **“the ministration of death, written and engraven in stone . . . is done away!”** If you let this passage grip you, my friend, you will never be bothered with the question of the Ten Commandments. Here Paul is contrasting the covenant of grace with the covenant of law; and he says that **“the ministration of death”** and **“of condemnation”** has been **“done away.”**

Turn now to Romans 7:1-4, where the Apostle Paul gives us a familiar illustration of this truth.

Try to imagine the wretched condition of a woman who is married to a stern husband. She is eager for deliverance, but she is **“bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man”** (Romans 7:2, 3).

Then Paul draws the comparison, saying: **“Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God”** (Romans 7:4).

The application is unmistakable.

A believer cannot be under law and under grace at the same time. The law is described as a stern husband; but death came; God sees us identified with Christ in His death and resurrection; and by faith we are **“married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead.”** Under the law the struggling soul cries out in despair: **“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the the body of this death?”** But under grace the wretchedness is turned to victory: **“I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** (Romans 7:24, 25).

Since the “keeping of the Sabbath” is the question usually raised at this point, let us look closely at what the Bible has to say on this particular subject.

A careful study of the matter will reveal a striking contrast between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day. Let us look at this contrast in outline:

### *The Jewish Sabbath*

1. The 7th day of the week.
2. Commemorated God's creation rest on the seventh day.
3. Commemorated a finished creation.
4. Compulsory obedience demanded.
5. **“Whosoever doeth work therein shall be put to death”** (Exodus 35:2; compare Numbers 15:32-36).
6. Represents the old creation.
7. Given to Israel under the law.

### *The Christian Lord's Day*

1. The 1st day of the week.
2. Commemorates Christ's resurrection from the dead on the first day.
3. Commemorates a finished redemption.
4. Voluntary worship and service expected.
5. Christ went about doing good on the Sabbath Day to show that He is Lord of the Sabbath, as well as **“the end of the law to him that believeth”** (Matthew 12:1-8).
6. Represents the new creation. (See II Corinthians 5:17).
7. Given to the Christian under grace.

Many Christians call the first day of the week the Sabbath Day.

They mean well, but the Bible never calls any day the Sabbath other than the seventh day. Moreover, all of the New Testament teaching regarding the Sabbath or seventh day observance proves unmistakably that this belonged to Israel under the law, and in Christ has been done away.

God is not resting now in the old creation. He made the heavens and the earth in six days; then He rested until sin entered to break His creation rest. Now He is resting in the finished work of Christ. **“When he had by himself purged our sins,”** He **“sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high”** (Hebrews 1:3 and many other similar references) .

Why did the Lord remain in the grave **“till the Sabbath was fully past?”** Because in His death the old creation passed away; **“therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new”** (II Corinthians 5:17).

**“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ”** (Colossians 2:16, 17).

God has blotted out **“the handwriting of ordinances”** (i.e., the law) **“nailing it to his cross”** (Colossians 2:14).

Again, those who adhere to the seventh day Sabbath are self-deceived if they think they are observing it.

Under the law a man was put to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath Day. (See Numbers 15:32-36). This, of course, he did in open defiance of God. But the law is stern. Let me ask you, my friend: Do you gather sticks on the seventh day, yet call that obedience to the law?

If you are trying to keep the law, then do not turn one finger to do any work.

- Do not ride the street cars; for in so doing, you cause others to work.
- Do not turn on the electric lights; for in so doing you cause others to work.
- Do not wash a dish or pick up a broom.

Moses said to Israel under the law, by the express commandment of the Lord: **“Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day”** (Exodus 3 5:3).

The law is stern; it demands perfect obedience.

**“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all”** (James 2:10).

**“The law was given by Moses,”** but thank God! **“grace and truth came by Jesus Christ”** (John 1:17). **“Ye are not under the law, but under grace,”** if you believe in the finished work of Christ. (Compare Romans 6:14).

## “The Law Of The Spirit Of Life In Christ Jesus”

But some go to the other extreme and erroneously say: “**Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?**” (Romans 6:1).

Paul voices this question of the man who says that “liberty is license.” No, my friend, liberty is not license! Though we have been delivered from the law of sin and death, yet there is no excuse for our being lawless.

Shall not the very fact that we have been delivered from the law, a stern husband, as it were, not make us all the more eager to please our new Husband, even Christ? Because we are not under the law, shall we steal and kill? No, if we truly love the Lord, we shall delight to please Him.

The law condemns, but Calvary breaks our hearts. When we look into the face of Jesus Christ and see what grace is, then we love Him and we want to please Him. Then the Lord's Day does not find us on the golf course or at the place of amusement. One-seventh of our time still belongs to God! And the more we know Him who redeemed us from the curse of the law, the more we shall love Him, seek His presence seven days in the week, and delight to do His will at all times.

### Mount Sinai or Mount Calvary?

Where will you take your stand, my brother? At the foot of Mount Sinai or at the foot of Mount Calvary? At Mount Sinai you see “**blackness, and darkness, and tempest.**” There you struggle and strive and “**fear and quake.**” (See Hebrews 12:18-21; compare Hebrews 12:22-24). But at Mount Calvary you see “**mercy and love flow mingled down.**” You see the bleeding form of Him who was “**wounded for our transgressions,**” and “**bruised for our iniquities.**” You see Him taking your place and mine, bearing the curse of the law, and “**nailing it to his cross.**” Take your stand at Mount Calvary, and then your heart can sing the words of the sinner saved by grace — and grace alone:

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee.

“Not the labor of my hands  
Can fulfill Thy law's demands.

“Nothing in my hands I bring;  
Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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