

has always been the way set out by God: “to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My word” (Isa. 66:2). As we seek to serve God, we realise that we will often fail and sin, but the antidote to this is prayer, fellowship with our brethren and sisters

and giving attendance to reading the Word of God. Paul teaches us that those in Christ are “renewed in *knowledge* after the image of Him That created him” (Col. 3:10). Let us pray that our faith in the gospel will, through Christ, bring us closer to our God.

“Wherefore then serveth the law?”

Geoff Henstock

The Law of Moses was a good law, yet powerless to save. What then was its purpose, and how is it relevant for us today?

THE BIBLE condemns legalism. It clearly demonstrates that a legalistic mindset is contrary to the mind of Christ that believers are required to develop. Legalism has a deadening influence on individuals and on any community where legalistic attitudes predominate. This being so, it might appear strange that law should have been such a feature of the Mosaic dispensation. There is much narrative in the Pentateuch, but the bulk of the material presented takes the form of detailed laws, ordinances and regulations. Why did God choose to reveal Himself to Israel through the Law of Moses? What were the underlying purposes of all these rules and regulations?

I would suggest that the Law of Moses served three basic purposes:

- 1 It provided a code of jurisprudence to govern the day-to-day lives of Israelites as citizens of the Kingdom of God.
- 2 The unmistakably Divine nature of the Law of Moses acted as a witness of the greatness of God to the Gentiles with whom Israel came into contact.
- 3 The Law was “a schoolmaster” to bring the nation unto Christ when he should be revealed (Gal. 3:24).

Regulating society

The Mosaic dispensation, like those that it preceded—the current dispensation established by Christ and the apostles, and even the Millennium soon to be established—was always intended to

be temporary. God has a plan which will culminate in Him being all and in all. In the meantime He has determined that there would be several transitional phases.

The Exodus marked a new beginning in God’s plan. At Sinai God established Israel as “a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Through various vicissitudes that nation was to last for over 1,500 years. It was essential that the nation have laws to ensure the maintenance of peace and order. Not surprisingly for a nation of priests, there is a heavy emphasis in the Law of Moses on religious rites, but there is also a comprehensive code of laws covering civil affairs (it would not be correct to speak of them as secular affairs in a theocracy) such as education, crimes against property and persons, protection of the vulnerable, and health and environmental matters.

The Ten Commandments are an example of how the Law of Moses blends the loftiest Divine principles with practical provisions for ordering civil society. One of them even refers to the fact that adherence would result in long-term peaceful existence in the Land: “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee” (20:12).

The fact that many became obsessed with compliance at the expense of commitment is a tragedy, but it was a failing on man’s part, not a flaw in the Law itself. The objective of the Law was to create a harmonious and mutually supportive society: “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt.

7:12). Paul, a man who knew the Law as well as any Jew, said, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

A witness to the Gentiles

It had always been God's intention to extend the gospel to the Gentiles. As Paul says in Galatians 3:8, this was implicit in the initial promise made to Abraham, the patriarch of the Israelites: "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). In accordance with another element of the same promises to Abraham, "I will . . . curse him that curseth thee", God had punished Egypt when he called Israel forth from bondage. And in conformity with another of his promises to Abraham (15:18-21), God would give Israel possession of the land of Canaan, displacing the existing inhabitants. God intended, however, that the nation should be a beacon in the midst of Gentile darkness, radiating the light of the gospel to all with whom they dealt.

In reiterating the Law to Israel on the plains of Moab immediately prior to the entry into the Promised Land, Moses drew the nation's attention to this fact. He used it as an exhortation to faithful adherence to the Law he had communicated to them:

"Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon Him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:5-8).

Israel's faithlessness greatly hampered it in the discharge of this witnessing role. When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon (1 Kgs. 10), for instance, there is no mention of her being impressed with the laws under which the kingdom was administered. There are, however, examples of individual Israelites whose faithfulness to the law of their God impressed Gentile observers. Daniel and his colleagues in Babylon honoured the Law even when it put their lives in danger (Dan. chs. 1,3 and 6), and their faithfulness is recorded as having a profound, perhaps trans-

forming, effect on Nebuchadnezzar (3:28,29) and Darius (6:25-27).

A schoolmaster

The Law's most important role, however, was to prepare the nation for the coming of Messiah: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Rom. 10:4). The Law "was added because of transgressions, *till the seed should come* to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:19). This is an important principle. The Law followed the promises but it did not annul them (v. 17). Israel was never told that their law replaced the promises. Their hope, the things in which they believed—in short, their faith—was rooted firmly in the promises to the patriarchs.

In developing this argument to the Galatians Paul had already pointed out that "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ . . . for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (2:16). Paul, "as touching the law, a Pharisee" (Phil. 3:5), was an expert on the Law. He knew from bitter experience that "no man is justified by the law in the sight of God" (Gal. 3:11).

In Romans 7 the apostle eloquently described the struggle of all the faithful when confronted with the reality of sin and the Law. Paul acknowledged the inherent rightness of the Law: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (v. 12, ESV). The Law is of God, so it could only be holy, righteous and good. But it could not bring life to the Israelite because it was "weak through the flesh" (8:3). So Paul went on to explain the real problem: "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (7:13, ESV).

A faithful, thoughtful Israelite would recognise that the Law, though holy, was inadequate in itself. The ritual of the Day of Atonement alone made that clear. Year after year the high priest repeated that ritual; after his death his successor repeated the ritual annually. The need for annual repetition underlined the fact that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4). It was sin that separated man from God (Isa. 59:2). The promises spoke of eternal life on earth, but the Law was powerless to overcome sin: "Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily

righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Gal. 3:21,22).

It is a fact that God revealed Himself and, at least in shadow, His Son through the Law: "Now before faith [that is, in Jesus Christ] came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (3:23,24, ESV). As Brother W. F. Barling says: "By convincing the people of sin and thus of their dire need of a Saviour, as also by its symbolic prefigurement of the appointed Saviour's work, the Law was manifestly designed to bring Israel to Christ".¹

The AV, following Tyndale, refers to the Law as "a schoolmaster"; the ESV translates this as "guardian"; Stern (the *Jewish New Testament*) renders it as "custodian"; other versions offer "child conductor" (*Young's Literal Translation*), "tutor" (NASB), "disciplinarian" (*Schonfield*) and "tutor-slave" (*Weymouth*). The wide variety of renditions illustrates the challenge the Greek word *paidagōgos* poses to translators.

Brother Michael Ashton explains why translators struggle with this word: "There is no exact equivalent in today's society to the Roman pedagogue, and we need to appreciate the cultural background if we are to understand the apostle's message. In a large household, a son was allocated an individual servant who was responsible for his welfare. In particular he accompanied the boy to school, helping him with his lessons and teaching him the manners and customs of the time. Whatever importance this slave had in the boy's life, he was replaceable. The father was different. He bore ultimate responsibility, through his relationship to the child".²

The law was intended to bring Israel to Christ, impressing on the nation the need for a saviour

while it instructed them in the ways of God. When Messiah came he specifically made the point that his purpose was not to destroy the Law: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Mt. 5:17).

Still relevant today

We who are in Christ are not under the Law, but the Law remains of value to us in this dispensation. We are not subject to the minutiae of its regulations; we are not required to offer sacrifices or keep the rituals. We can, nevertheless, draw significant benefit from a close study of its provisions.

At a practical level, the Law's emphasis on the need to protect the interests of the weak and the vulnerable, and to exercise sound stewardship, provides a basis for a happy and productive pilgrimage. At a more spiritual level (perhaps), the Law teaches us about the relationship between God and man. It emphasises the importance of holiness: "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). We who wish God to dwell with us, and who wish ultimately to dwell with God in the Kingdom of God, will find in the laws about the tabernacle much that will assist us in our walk.

We know that we are saved by grace, but the recipients of God's grace must manifest graciousness to those with whom they mix. We must never forget that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Love is the great objective of the law; love of our neighbours, love of our fellow believers and love of our Lord Jesus Christ and Almighty God.

1. *Law and Grace*, p. 10.

2. *The Challenge of Corinthians*, p. 46. (This comment is written in relation to "instructors" in 1 Corinthians 4:15, but it is applicable to Galatians 3:24 also.) See also Brother J. Carter, *The Letter to the Galatians*, page 90.

In attempting to put the several aspects of the Mosaic Law into tabular form, we may suggest that the Law was designed:

- 1 to teach the will of God and show the ideal way of human life;
- 2 as a workable code to guide the affairs of a nation;
- 3 to prepare for much greater things to come by:
 - (a) rigid rules of separation and cleanliness emphasising human imperfections;
 - (b) laws that revealed the weakness of humanity, making sin appear still more sinful;
 - (c) ritual prophecy.

The blending of the first two objects into a single code is unusual and distinctive. The third object is unique.

Islip Collyer, "The Law given through Moses", *Testimony*, Dec. 2000, p. 457