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### Paul's Epistle to the Romans - Part 2: A Broader Concept of Law: Also a Glimpse of the Atonement

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# A Broader Concept of Law

## Also a Glimpse of the Atonement

By EARLE HILGERT

[The following study is based on Romans 2:12 to 4:25. To derive the most benefit from the article, read the Scripture passage first.—Editors.]

FOR the first time in the Epistle to the Romans, Paul speaks of the "law" in chapter 2:12. This opens up a subject that was of vital concern to both Jewish and Gentile Christians—to the Jew because it was his religious heritage and the center of his religious life; to the Gentile precisely because it was *not* his heritage and yet his new Christian faith was intimately involved with it. Consequently Paul turns now to this vital subject and concerns himself with it in one way or another throughout much of the rest of Romans.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty for us today in understanding Paul's teaching on the law lies in the fact that our religious environment is so different from his. When we speak of the "law," immediately there comes to our minds the Ten Commandments as given to Moses on Sinai. Paul's use of the term, however, shows clearly that for him the "law" included much more than this. Though a Christian missionary to the Gentiles, Paul was also a Jewish rabbi in education and mentality. Long after his baptism he could still enter a synagogue on the Sabbath day and preach effectively to a Jewish congregation (Acts 13:14-42). When he uttered the Hebrew word *torah* or wrote the Greek word *nomos*, both of which mean "law," inevitably there came to his mind and to the minds of his hearers and readers the law as they knew it in the context of contemporary Judaism. If we are to understand Paul today, we must try to sit where he and his readers sat, seeing through their eyes and hearing through their ears.

From the Jewish standpoint, the term *law* could be understood in four ways. At the heart of all ideas of the

law were, of course, the Ten Commandments. Usually when Paul wished to give an example of the law he drew from one of these (see Rom. 7:7). More broadly, however, the law was the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, as it is today also in official Hebrew terminology. But wider still, the term often refers to the whole Old Testament, as in Romans 3:10-19, where Paul quotes at length from the Psalms and Isaiah and then immediately refers to this as the "law." In its widest sense the "law" embraced the entire revealed will of God as set forth in the Jewish religion. Thus the Pharisees of ancient times were accustomed to speak of the common people as the group that "knoweth not the law," that is, "those who are not well informed on their religion."

Obviously these different meanings of the law were not mutually exclusive. In fact, each narrower definition is contained in all of the broader ones. We can diagram the Jewish view of the law as four concentric circles with the Ten Commandments as the innermost circle, at the heart of it all. Consequently it is not always possible to say specifically which of these ideas Paul has in mind at any given point. Much of the time, however, he simply uses the term in its broadest sense, that of Judaism as he knew it, yet focusing ultimately in the Decalogue.

It is this very broad sense of the law that Paul seems to have in mind as he opens his discussion in chapter 2:12. He declares that "all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law, will be judged by the law" (R.S.V.). That he is drawing a comparison between the Jew and the Gentile is clear from the verses that immediately precede this statement, where he has been making the same contrast. In the verse just quoted he is simply saying that

those who have sinned outside the context of Judaism, that is, as Gentiles, will meet their fate as Gentiles, apart from any consideration of Judaism, and all those Jews whose sins have been committed within the context of Judaism will be held responsible for the fact that they have had its advantages. This is much the same as had been declared long before by the psalmist: "The Lord records as he registers the peoples, 'This one was born there'" (Ps. 87:6, R.S.V.).

### Obedying the Law "by Nature"

This broad sense in which Paul here discusses the law becomes immediately important when, in Romans 2, verse 14, he raises the question of Gentiles' doing by nature what the law requires, and then declares that "they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law" (R.S.V.).

What does this mean? Doubtless Paul is here referring to the *function* of the law as God originally intended it. He writes elsewhere that "Christ is the end [or "purpose"] of the law" (Rom. 10:4). It was God's intention for Judaism that it should point forward to Christ. It is the conviction of all the New Testament writers that the promise of God made in the Old Testament has indeed been fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 1:2-4). Paul appears then to be discussing this divine intention of the law when he speaks of Gentiles' doing by nature what the law requires. He is saying to the Jewish Christians of Rome, "You have had the *torah*, you have been nurtured in Judaism and it has prepared you and pointed you to Christ, but the Gentiles have never had this advantage; nevertheless, they too have been able to come to Christ and in doing so they have done what the law requires even though they do not have the law [i.e. even though they were not nurtured in Judaism]. The preparatory work of the *torah* was not done for them in the synagogue as it was for you, but they were prepared by a law 'written on their hearts,' for they too have come to Christ."

In other words, Paul is simply arguing here from the practical standpoint of the fact that although the law, that is, Judaism, embodied God's plan for preparing people to become Christians, nevertheless the plain fact that the Gentiles had become Christians without it showed clearly that the work of God's Spirit on the heart could prepare men for Christ even though they had missed the advantages enjoyed by the Jews.

If these arguments seem foreign to our way of thinking, we must remember that for Paul the immediate practical issue revolved around the problem of uniting Jews and Gentiles in one universal Christian church. It is clear, especially from Acts 15 and Galatians 1 and 2, that one of the most baffling problems of Paul's ministry was the reticence of the Jews to acknowledge that a Gentile could become a Christian without first becoming a Jew. We do not face this problem today, but we must always keep it in mind if we are to understand what Paul writes to his readers. This is of particular importance when we seek to follow his reasoning about the law.

In the last two verses of chapter 2 Paul goes on to say "He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" (verses 28, 29, R.S.V.). Here he declares that since the really important function of Judaism was to prepare for Christ, when a man comes to Christ the preparatory work has been done in his heart, "inwardly," and hence the man is a "Jew." In this context the word "Jew" almost has the sense of "one who has been prepared for Christ."

Beginning with chapter 3, verse 21, Paul takes a further step to describe how salvation (the righteousness of God) has been manifested apart from the formal context of

Judaism, although he immediately takes pains to remind us that "the law and the prophets bear witness to it."

It is characteristic of Paul that he never tries to enter into the inner mystery of the plan of salvation to describe in literal terms the mechanics of the atonement. He is always content to declare merely the fact—that God has given us salvation. But he never attempts to detail the how. Throughout Christian history a succession of theologians have attempted to explain the mechanics of the atonement. One theory has held that God paid Jesus' life as a ransom to Satan for the souls of men. Another theory has declared that the death of Christ vindicated the honor of God and thus made it possible for Him to forgive us. A third view has explained the atonement in terms of Christ's bearing punishment deserved by the sinner and so satisfying the justice of God. A fourth has emphasized the dynamic of Christ's self-sacrificing example.

The Bible, however, never attempts to set forth a detailed, literal explanation of the inner workings of the atonement. While there are elements of truth in all of the classical theories, we must ever remember that it is safest to stay by the Biblical point of view and be satisfied to speak of the atonement in the Biblical phrases, without attempting to spell out in literal terms the mysteries that those phrases embody. It is sufficient that Christ died for our sins.

Paul repeatedly uses figures of speech to present the mystery. For example, in chapter 3:24, 25. C. H. Dodd has pointed out (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* [London, 1954], pp. 51-56) that Paul here uses a number of words that conjure up pictures in our minds. Each of these pictures is a kind of figure of speech to describe a facet of the atonement.

### Facets of the Atonement

The first of these picture words is *justified* (verse 24). To us this word suggests a legal act, such as centers in a court of law. At the same time we must remember that Paul's vocabulary is largely influenced by that of the Old Testament. Doubtless he is not thinking here so much in terms of Roman justice, as he is of Old Testament righteousness. (In Greek and Hebrew the ideas of "righteousness" and "justice" are represented by only one word in each language.)

The Hebrew word for righteousness, *sedaqah*, is closely connected with the idea of "vindication." Thus the righteous judge is not simply the one who punishes the evildoer in accord with the dictates of law; he is also, and more, the one who defends and vindicates the cause of the injured and oppressed. Conversely, the evil judge is the one who fails in these responsibilities. This throws light on the whole Pauline concept of the "righteousness of God."

A very important aspect of God's righteousness is the fact that he vindicates us. Thus when Paul conjures up for us the scene of a law court, the basic theme of the scene is that God, the righteous judge, vindicates and acquits us "by his grace as a gift." No human judge could justly acquit a sinner (cf. Isa. 5:23; Prov. 17:15; Ex. 23:7). Only God can do this.

The second picture word that Paul employs in describing the atonement is *redemption*. This word must have brought to the minds of the church members in Rome a very common scene in their world, the picture of a slave market. The word translated "redemption" normally implied a payment of money through which a slave or prisoner of war was set free. However, in a more general sense the word meant "emancipation" without regard to payment. Doubtless it is in this latter sense that Paul employs it here.

Paul is not attempting to teach that Christ's life was paid to Satan in return for souls of the saved; he is simply

saying that as in ancient times men often were set free by their master's good will, so God has set us free from the bondage of sin and death. It is interesting to note that the word translated "redemption" here is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the freeing of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Adolf Deissmann (*Light From the Ancient East* [London, 1911], pp. 328ff.) has pointed out that the practice of freeing slaves was common in the Roman world, and has drawn attention to certificates of emancipation that have been discovered in modern times. Not infrequently on these certificates the stipulation is made that the man who is set free can never again be taken back into slavery. So, in using this figure of speech implying the act of manumission, Paul was employing a powerful symbol for the atonement.

### Expiation

The third word which Paul uses here to describe the atonement is *expiation*. This word brings to our minds a picture of the high priest ministering in the sanctuary. In fact, the Greek word here translated "expiation" is also employed in the Greek Old Testament for the "mercy seat" or "lid" that covered the ark in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary, before which the priests ministered on the Day of Atonement. There has been much discussion among theologians as to whether this word should be translated here "propitiation" as in the King James Version or "expiation" as in the Revised Standard Version. "Propitiation" implies assuaging the wrath of an angry God. "Expiation" refers rather to making up a lack.

The Greek word at this point can be translated either way, so far as its basic meaning is concerned. The context, however, seems to point strongly in the direction of "expiation," for Paul says that God put forward Christ. If we were to understand this as assuaging the wrath of God we would come out with the strange thought that God had assuaged His own wrath. We are on much safer ground if we understand Paul here to say simply that God by the gift of His Son made up that which was lacking.

It is important here to recognize what Paul really means when he says that this expiation is "by his blood." We commonly think of blood as a symbol of death, yet in the Biblical context blood is much more a symbol of *life*. Thus in Leviticus 17:11, a text that has much in common with

the passage we are discussing, the eating of blood is forbidden, "for the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, *by reason of the life*" (R.S.V.). Jesus' death gave to us of His life. It is His life that makes good what is lacking in our lives, and it is in His life that we have eternal life (1 Cor. 15:22).

### The Case of Abraham

In chapter 4 Paul turns to the specific case of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. He argues that Abraham had faith in God and that this was reckoned to him as righteousness even before he was circumcised. By an ingenious bit of logic he goes on to declare that since Abraham had faith before circumcision he is the father of "all who believe without being circumcised," (verse 11), that is, the Gentile Christians! Paul immediately affirms that Abraham is the father of the circumcised, as well, if they follow his example in faith; that is, he is the father of the Jewish Christians. Here in one bold stroke Paul makes Abraham the father of all Christians. This, of course, is in harmony with the thought that he later expresses that Christians constitute true Israel.

Paul bolsters his argument in verse 17 by another ingenious use of words, playing on the "nations." In Greek the word *nations* and the word *Gentiles* is the same. Thus in quoting the promise to Abraham, "I have made you the father of many nations," Paul is also saying that God has promised that Abraham would be the "father of many Gentiles."

But the real thrust of Paul's argument does not depend on his ingenious use of words. It is rather that Abraham, distinguished by faith in God, even when that faith seemed to have no visible basis, is thus constituted the father of all who, like him, have faith today. His faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness," and

Paul assures us that these words were written "not for his sake alone, but for ours also." As children of Abraham and spiritual members of Israel we are assured that the righteousness of God will also be "reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (verses 24, 25, R.S.V.).

## Camp Meeting in Navaholand

(Continued from page 1)

not infrequently late into the night.

With each passing year the medical work load at Monument Valley Hospital increases. The Navahos, learning to trust the white man's medicine, now come to the hospital and its busy outpatient clinic with increasing frequency. Medical director is Dr. J. Lloyd Mason.

An outpatient clinic is staffed at Mexican Hat, Utah, about 25 miles north of Rock Door Canyon, by medical personnel from the hospital, and a husband-wife nurse team from the mission staff also man a modern medical clinic for the Navaho Tribal Council in the remote Navaho Mountain area.

Every day personnel from the mission make visits to the many hogans to give Bible studies to interested Navahos. An 80-member church in Rock Door Canyon is the scene of frequent baptisms in which souls won from the 90,000-member Navaho tribe join the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Full of faith and hard at work bringing physical and spiritual healing to the Navahos, workers at the Monument Valley Mission and Hospital look toward the day when the hundreds of tribal superstitions may be fully overcome through God's great plan, and the harvest in Navaholand will be truly great!

## Constant Miracle

By OLIVE C. LEARY

Just a few slender stems planted well in the ground  
With water and love and the sunshine and rain  
Quickly brought out new leaves, and in no time was found  
A blossom from only a slim, one-inch cane.

Yet the smallest faith roots will amazingly bear  
Rich fruits of the Spirit when nurtured with prayer.