

Has the Law of Moses ended?

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HAS THE LAW OF MOSES ENDED?

I have written this alongside the commentary I did on Galatians. Rather than simply finish the commentary at the end of chapter 6, I chose to carry on and write this article to examine many other passages which support what Paul is saying in Galatians and to confirm that the Law of Moses has ended. Ordinarily it would not be necessary to go to such lengths to prove this because, to any reasonable person, Galatians is already clear enough in this regard.

However, despite everything Paul says in Galatians there are many who remain adamant that the Law of Moses is still in operation and that we are bound by it. Effectively, they are either saying Paul is mistaken or somehow Galatians is not actually saying the Law has ended, and that people like me have misunderstood it. Accordingly, I want to continue addressing the current status of the Law by reference to other books and letters besides Galatians, to make it unmistakably clear.

I aim to prove, beyond all doubt, that the Law of Moses ended when Jesus died and that this is not just Paul's idea. On the contrary, he is fully supported by other New Testament writers and by the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, and also by what he himself says in his other letters. In other words, the key message about the ending of the Law is not only set out in Galatians alone, but also in many other places.

However, although this article will show dozens of proofs that the Law has ended, none of them will come from Galatians. That is the main letter which deals with the ending of the Law, but I do not wish to repeat its evidence here as I have already covered it in my commentary on Galatians. So, please refer to that for yet further proof.

However, before we look at the long list of verses which unquestionably support Paul, we shall first look at a small number of what we might call 'problem passages'. These might appear, at first sight, to contradict Paul but they actually fully support him when they are properly understood.

Some "problem passages" which many people see as proof that the Law of Moses has not ended

Perhaps the best place to begin is with what many would regard as the most controversial passage in the whole New Testament on this issue. It is repeatedly brought up on Facebook and Twitter by those who believe the Law of Moses is still in operation. I refer to Matthew 5:17-20, part of the Sermon on the Mount, in which many people think Jesus directly contradicts what Paul later says in Galatians.

It is presented as a kind of 'trump card', as if it proves categorically that Paul must be wrong or that we are now misunderstanding Galatians. In fact, as I shall demonstrate below, Jesus is not contradicting Paul at all i.e. when we read this passage from Matthew correctly in its proper context.

The point is the Sermon on the Mount was given *while the Law of Moses was still in operation* and was actually *Jesus' own interpretation of the Law of Moses, as it stood at that time*. Once we realise that Jesus was speaking about the situation *as it then was, not as it now is*, we will see that Jesus fully supports Paul, or rather that Paul fully supports Jesus.

So, we shall now look at that apparently problematical passage and show it is not a problem at all and is fully consistent with the Law having ended with the death of Jesus Christ. To be more precise, I

think it actually ended very shortly after His death, on the morning of His resurrection, but before Jesus went to Heaven to offer His own blood in the original Holy Place in Heaven, of which the Temple in Jerusalem is only a replica.

I think it was just before He entered the Holy Place on that Sunday morning that the Law finally ended. I shall explain this assertion more fully at the end of this article when we look at the letter to the Hebrews. That said, if we are not seeking to be exact, we generally refer to the Law as having ended at Jesus' death. That is the phrase most often used and is accurate enough and I have no objection to it.

Let us deal firstly with Matthew 5:17-18. These are the verses which are most widely quoted by those who think the Law is still in operation. They make that claim on the basis that Jesus said He had *not* come to *abolish* it. They assume that if He has not come to "abolish" it then that must mean He hasn't come to end it either, as if abolishing was the only way to end something.

Many see this as an unanswerable 'clincher' which, in their opinion, is so conclusive it ends the whole argument before it even begins. They believe it confirms the Law will continue *until Heaven and Earth pass away*, in which case it must still be in operation now. And this is seen as undeniable, such that no further discussion is needed.

Therefore, my aim in this article is to prove that is not what Jesus meant at all. Instead, He was saying that He Himself was going to fulfil the Law of Moses by accomplishing all of it i.e. by obeying it perfectly for His entire life, and then bring it to an end so that it could be replaced by the "New Covenant". Thus, He was saying the very opposite of what these people think He meant.

Does Matthew 5:17-18 mean the Law of Moses has not ended?

¹⁷ "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them."¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Matthew 5:17-18 (RSV)

As for the question of whether Paul is contradicting Jesus, let me say at the outset that every verse of the entire Bible has equal authority as God's Word. That is because every verse was inspired by the Holy Spirit and is 'Scripture'. It is all therefore equally infallible no matter what man wrote it. Every verse is really what the Holy Spirit is saying, not Paul or John or Matthew etc, as they only wrote what the Holy Spirit inspired them to write.

That means the words written by apostle Paul have equal authority to every other verse in the Bible, including the words spoken by Jesus Himself, because "*all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness*" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Therefore, given that what Paul wrote is Scripture, it has equal authority to what Jesus said. Accordingly, what Paul says in Galatians is not contradicting Jesus. It is clarifying His words, so we can understand them more fully.

Before we examine the whole of these two verses line by line, perhaps the best place to start is by looking at the first line of verse 17 and to ask:

a) what does the word "*abolish*" mean?

- b) what is “*the Law*”?
- c) why does Jesus also refer to “*the prophets*”?

I say that because verse 17 seems to cause the most confusion. It is that verse, and especially Jesus saying He has not come to ‘abolish’ the Law, that most people rely on to argue the Law is still in operation. It seems to them that if He isn’t abolishing it then He can’t be ending it. That is where they make their main mistake.

What does “abolish” mean?

The word translated ‘abolish’ comes from the Greek word *katalayo* which has a very negative connotation and can also be translated as ‘destroy’ or ‘throw down’. So, Jesus used the negative word abolish and then contrasted it with the much more positive word ‘fulfil’. What He meant was that He intends to bring the Law of Moses to an end but in a positive way, by fulfilling it, not by destroying it, as one might do if there was something wrong with it.

On the contrary, although He planned to end it, there was nothing wrong with the Law of Moses and Jesus wasn’t against it or criticising it. Indeed, it was He who gave the Law to Moses in the first place and it was His finger which wrote on the tablets of stone. So, He was wholly in favour of the Law.

Nevertheless, the fact that He did not intend to destroy it or abolish it or throw it down did not mean that He had no plans to end it. Logically, that assumption does not follow at all. Neither does the Bible ever say that. Indeed, we can show the opposite is the case.

We know beyond any doubt that He intended to end it, not only because the New Testament repeatedly tells us that *He did end it*, but also because the very word ‘fulfil’ contains the clear implication of bringing it to an end. It goes without saying and is what we assume automatically when anything is fulfilled (or accomplished) in our day to day lives. We know it has then ended without needing to be told.

What did Jesus mean by “the Law”? And why does He distinguish it from “the prophets”?

Whenever the phrase “*the Law*” is used in the New Testament *it means the Law of Moses*, not any other kind of law. Neither does it mean the prophets or the Bible as a whole. We can be particularly sure of that in this case because Jesus immediately adds the words “*and the prophets*” alongside His reference to the Law.

That tells us Jesus is distinguishing between the Law and the prophets to remove any doubt that “the Law” means the Law of Moses and nothing else. Therefore, it is the Law that is to be fulfilled and ended, not some other thing. That said, it also tells us He intends to fulfil *both* the Law of Moses *and* the prophets. So, one day He will fulfil the prophets too, and the whole Bible.

But the central fact for our purposes is that He also wanted to fulfil (and end) the Law of Moses. That is the controversial issue we are dealing with here and the fact which so many people deny. The only difference is that the fulfilment (and ending) of the Law of Moses has already happened, but the fulfilment has still to happen in the future for the prophets and the rest of the Bible.

That will occur when all the currently unfulfilled prophecies are fulfilled and everything that God has said will happen has happened, including the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Return of Christ, the Millennium and the coming down on to the Earth of Heaven itself, together with God the Father, to establish the New Jerusalem. Then, not only Jesus will be present on the Earth as King of Israel, but God the Father will also live, for all eternity, on this physical Earth. So, as you can see, there is still a lot to happen so far as the prophets are concerned.

How did Jesus “fulfil” the Law and what did He have to “accomplish”?

The Law of Moses was not fulfilled until Jesus had finished His earthly ministry, during which He obeyed it perfectly at all times. He was the first person ever to do so. Everyone else failed even if, by any other measurement, they were exemplary people whom the Bible praises for their godliness. Thus, not even Daniel, Isaiah, or Jeremiah were able to obey the Law perfectly. Neither did Paul, either before or after he became a Christian. Indeed, not even Moses was able to.

It is central to the Gospel message that Jesus lived a life entirely without sin from beginning to end. Therefore, Jesus not only had the righteousness He had always had by virtue of being the Son of God. He also had the righteousness *that He earned for Himself as a man*, by living in absolute accordance with the Law.

It was by so doing that He *fulfilled* it. The things that needed to be “*accomplished*” by Him were to obey every detail of the Law for His whole lifetime. That was the enormous task He was set, and He achieved it. In other words, He passed the test that everyone else failed.

And we must not underestimate the gigantic scale of that task. Nobody else in over 1500 years had managed to obey it all perfectly for a lifetime. What Jesus did was far harder than being the first man to climb Mount Everest or to run a four minute mile. It was off the scale in terms of difficulty such that literally nobody else, before or since, has even come close to achieving what He did in passing that test.

That test having been passed *on behalf of all of us*, He made it possible for the Law of Moses to be brought to an end and for that crushing burden to be removed from our shoulders. Therefore, when we speak of ‘imputed righteousness’ or having all of the righteousness of Jesus Christ ‘transferred to us’ or ‘credited to our account’ it includes our being credited with having fully observed the Law ourselves, as if we had done so, even though we never did and never could.

But the only way Jesus’ righteousness can be transferred to us so that we can be saved is if we are willing to receive it as a free gift, by grace, through faith, not by attempting to observe the Law for ourselves. It is as if Jesus was to write our name on His exam paper and then hand it in to be marked as if we had done it and to allow us to receive all the credit that was rightly due to Him. There is no point in you trying to “sit the exam” yourself and hand in your own “exam paper”. You would only fail miserably.

Someone might ask why Jesus did not bring the Law to an end at an earlier point, *during* His earthly ministry, before He died for us on the cross. The answer is simply that *at that stage* He was still actively engaged in observing the Law on our behalf, as he was obligated to do, and He had not yet finished. He had not yet passed the test. That is why, at that time, He spoke of the Law in the present tense, as a live and active thing which was still current because, *at that time*, it *was* still in operation. Therefore, how could He say otherwise?

One might also ask why Jesus said so much about the Law and promoted and endorsed it, and even widened the definitions of certain words such as adultery or murder, if He knew the Law was very soon to be fulfilled and ended? I believe the answer is that, in the Sermon on the Mount, He was simply giving His interpretation of the Law of Moses as it then stood, i.e. in contrast to the faulty interpretations given by the Pharisees.

Their false teachings had led to the creation of the entirely man made ‘*oral law*’, or ‘*traditions of the elders*’, which they added on top of the Law of Moses. Jesus considered these to be invalid and refused to obey their rules. That infuriated the Pharisees which is one reason why so many of them hated Him.

At any rate, albeit that the Law was soon to end, it was still operative at that time and continued to be so during the entirety of His earthly ministry. Therefore, it was His duty not only to obey the Law but to defend, promote and endorse it, for the simple reason that it had not yet ended.

Accordingly, it was important for Him to include within His teaching a clear explanation of what the Law really meant and how it should be interpreted, in contrast to the many errors being taught by the Pharisees. He knew they had largely got it wrong and it needed to be put right therefore – even though He knew the Law was soon to end.

So, asking why Jesus continued to promote and endorse the Law to the very end of His life is like asking why a person who has run 26 miles of a marathon race keeps on running even when there are only a few hundred yards remaining. The answer is because the race has not yet ended.

A line by line examination of Matthew 5:17-18

We need to approach these two verses as if we were doing an English comprehension test, or interpreting the meaning of a clause in a contract. That requires us to go through each line and become clear as to exactly what is meant by each phrase, but also to look at the overall meaning when those phrases are combined together.

Verse 17

Therefore, if we look at the first line of verse 17 we are told “*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets.....*”. But all that line tells us is that He has *not* come to do that. It doesn’t tell us what He *is* going to do. Neither does telling us this prevent Him from saying anything further or having any other intentions for the future of the Law.

All He has done so far in that first line is to rule out abolishing or destroying the Law which, as we have seen, has negative connotations. But we can’t stop there. The sentence is not yet complete and Jesus has more detail to give us.

So, He continues with “*I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*”. This tells us, firstly, that the Law is going to be fulfilled and, secondly, that He Himself is going to do the fulfilling, not someone or something else. But, given that Jesus’ remaining time on Earth in His earthly ministry was short, it follows logically that the fulfilling of the Law by Him had to occur in the next year or two, i.e. before His death.

Even if those present had not realised at the time that He was going to die, they ought to have known, given that He had told them plainly several times. But even if they had not yet heard that, they must have heard Him say so shortly afterwards, or at least heard of it after His resurrection. Therefore, given that He is the one who must personally fulfil the Law, they ought to have had it in their minds that He would do so soon, or at least within a number of years, while He was still with them.

However, even if they didn't realise that, *we should realise it now* as we look back with the benefit of hindsight. The point is that the deeds or achievements of Jesus which were to bring about the fulfilment of the Law plainly had to be done by Him personally. That means they had to occur *during His earthly ministry*, not 2000 or more years later, during the Church age, when Jesus is no longer on the Earth in bodily form to do the fulfilling.

In other words, the deeds or accomplishments which fulfil the Law cannot be done by anyone else at a later point. Neither can they consist of the mere passage of time, or even the passing away of Heaven and Earth, because their passing away, spectacular though it will be, is not *a deed performed by Jesus*. Neither does it have anything to do with accomplishing the requirements of the Law of Moses.

Therefore, those events cannot be classified as the deed or achievement *in His ministry* which causes the Law to be fulfilled *by Him* as opposed to being done by someone or something else.

Verse 18

Then Jesus says “*For truly I say to you, till Heaven and Earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished*”. Notice that we have here two different ‘untils’ or conditions alongside each other in the same sentence. And, in both cases, the same Greek word is used, i.e. ‘*heos*’, so they mean exactly the same.

We are told the Law will not pass away, not even to the extent of an iota or a dot, *until Heaven and Earth pass away*. So that is the first point in time that is referred to. But then Jesus immediately gives us another ‘until’ right alongside the first one when He says “*until all is accomplished*”. It is understandable that this “combination of untils” could confuse people.

It seems at first sight to present two different ‘conditions precedent,’ (i.e. things that need to happen first), before the Law can end. But that isn't the case. Jesus is just using a figure of speech or a poetic flourish to emphasise His point. He means that from then on until the end of this world, nothing can alter or revoke even the smallest part of the Law *until He ends it Himself* by “accomplishing all things”, i.e. by perfectly obeying the Law and “passing the test” that God set for Him.

So, the accomplishing referred to in verse 18 is directly linked to the fulfilling spoken of in verse 17. It is all one thought, or one precondition for the ending of the Law, not two separate conditions. The only reason for Him referring to the passing away of Heaven and Earth was to emphasise His point about the impossibility of anybody else, or anything else, ever ending the Law other than Him.

We have to read the whole passage, not just the first line

It is vitally important therefore when reading Matthew 5:17-18 that we read *all of it*, not just the first line of verse 17 as so many people do. Many focus only on: “*Think not that I have come to abolish the law....*” but totally ignore what Jesus then went on to say about *fulfilling* the law and how it would continue *until all was accomplished*.

One can't leave those words out. They are just as true and just as important as the words which went before them. So, we must deal with the whole passage and not just cling to a single phrase or the first line of a verse, while ignoring other words that are equally from the Holy Spirit which modify the meaning of that phrase or provide an end date for it.

Therefore, anyone who focuses solely on the fact that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and who thinks He was therefore saying it will continue until "Heaven and Earth pass away" has a duty to answer a number of questions:

- a) Why did Jesus go on to say that He came to "*fulfil*" the Law (and the prophets)?
- b) What exactly was He required to do to fulfil it?
- c) Given that Jesus is explicitly saying He came to fulfil the Law, what does that suggest will happen to the Law after He has fulfilled it? Will it then end or continue?
- d) Moreover, what does that word 'fulfil' imply about whether the Law would end at some time earlier than when Heaven and Earth pass away?
- e) If Jesus intended to fulfil the Law, why would we assume He would leave it until after Heaven and Earth pass away before doing so? Would it not make far more sense for Him to do so before then? Ought that not to be our starting assumption in interpreting these verses?
- f) Why did Jesus say "*until all is accomplished*"? What exactly needed to be accomplished?
- g) What does that phrase "until all is accomplished" also imply about the Law ending earlier than when Heaven and Earth pass away?
- h) What normally happens to any goal, project or task in our ordinary day to day lives once everything has been accomplished? Wouldn't we all agree that it then ends? How could any task or project continue after everything has been done?

The point is Jesus did not say "*the Law will not end until Heaven and Earth pass away*" and then stop there and leave it at that. Had He said that, and nothing more, then I would rewrite this article to prove the Law is still in operation. But he didn't. What He did was to specify a "condition precedent" or triggering event which, if it was to occur, would end the Law *before* Heaven and Earth pass away.

That is plainly what His overall statement means. To paraphrase Him, He was saying the Law would not pass away until Heaven and Earth pass away **unless it is fulfilled at an earlier date by Him accomplishing all that is required by the Law of Moses, in which case it will end earlier.**

Jesus' meaning is crystal clear once you look at the whole statement and read both verses together *as a complete unit*. Otherwise, if we just focus on the first line of verse 17, and ignore everything else, as so many people do, Jesus would have been using those two phrases, "*but to fulfil them*" and "*until all is accomplished*", needlessly and irrelevantly.

It would be as if those words meant nothing and added nothing to the two sentences which He spoke. But that is out of the question, as every word Jesus ever said was carefully chosen and absolutely necessary and meaningful. The two phrases, and in particular the two words, 'fulfil' and

‘accomplished’, undeniably mean something important and it is everyone’s duty to ask what that meaning is.

Yet, in the debates I have engaged in on Twitter, both phrases are routinely ignored by supporters of the Law and no meaning is suggested for either of them. They are effectively edited out as if Jesus had never said them. Above all, people vigorously deny that those words contain any suggestion of Jesus ending the Law.

The words ‘fulfil’ and ‘accomplished’ both clearly imply that the thing being spoken about has ended

Both of these words, ‘fulfil’ and ‘accomplished’, carry within them the clear implication of there being an *ending* when they occur. That is how we would all interpret those two words in ordinary day to day speech. So, if something is fulfilled we know it is over.

Likewise, if something is accomplished we know it has ended, and that the person won’t be continuing to try to achieve that goal. So if we have accomplished our task of repainting the living room, we then stop painting. We would not need to be told to stop. It would be considered self evident.

Let me give another example of how fulfilling a goal or accomplishing a task automatically means it is over and has ended, even where two “untils” are used in the same sentence, i.e. where the person refers to two events as Jesus did. Imagine I had said many years ago “**Until** my dying day, I will study **until** I have fulfilled my ambition of being admitted as a Solicitor in England and Wales”.

I then achieved that in 1989 and was admitted to the Roll, thereby *fulfilling* that ambition. Would any sensible person have said my words meant I intended to keep on studying permanently to be admitted as a Solicitor “*until my dying day*”, even after I had already been admitted? Would they think my words meant I had made a vow that I would keep on aiming to achieve that ambition *for the rest of my life* despite the fact that I had already achieved it?

Of course not. Everybody would know the additional qualifying words “*until I have fulfilled my ambition*” modified the first ‘until’ and created an earlier end date. The overall meaning is then that nothing would stop me pursuing my goal to be admitted as a solicitor *until I had been admitted* – which is clearly the fulfilment. Then, quite obviously, I would stop, even though it was not yet my dying day.

Here is another example, this time using the word ‘accomplished’. After I qualified in England and Wales, I then took the California bar exam and was admitted as an attorney in California as well. Now imagine that prior to that I had said “*I will seek to be admitted in California as long as there is breath in my body until I have accomplished my goal.*”

So, when I then passed my California bar exam and was admitted, would you say “*You still have breath in your body so I assume that for as long as you live you will carry on seeking to be admitted in California*”?

Every sensible bystander would reply on my behalf: “*No, he was just using a figure of speech. What he meant was he would keep on trying to be admitted in California until he had accomplished that goal – then he will obviously stop*”.

I realise those examples sound absurd but I think it is almost as absurd not to be able to see what Jesus meant when He used the crucial modifying words “*but to fulfil them*”, and “*until all is accomplished*”. The meaning in each case is just as obvious, and the implication that the Law of Moses will end when He has fulfilled it is equally clear, notwithstanding that millions are unable to see it.

The reason I am repeatedly emphasising this point, which in any other context would be considered utterly obvious, is that when it comes to reading verses 17-18 of Matthew chapter five, many people’s English comprehension skills seem to vanish. They then interpret the verses as if the words ‘fulfil’ and ‘accomplished’ were not there, or had no meaning.

In conclusion, I believe we might find it helpful to paraphrase verses 17-18 to read as follows:

“Think not that I have come to end the Law by abolishing it or destroying it. I haven’t come to end it in any negative way, but rather to end it in a positive way by fulfilling it myself.

For truly I say to you, till Heaven and Earth pass away nothing and nobody will be able to make even a tiny letter or dot of the Law pass away until I myself cause it to pass away when I have accomplished the purpose of the Law.”

If we read verses 17-18 along those lines, the meaning suddenly becomes clear and all the confusion disappears. And I believe I am paraphrasing them in a fair and reasonable way and accurately reflecting their meaning though you, of course, must be the judge of that. Nevertheless I hope that clarifies the position and enables you to see more clearly what Jesus really meant.

At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 there were many people who had heard the Sermon on the Mount. But nobody said Paul was contradicting Jesus.

There is another compelling argument for believing that what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5 does not conflict with what Paul later said about the Law having ended. It is that at the ‘Jerusalem Council’ in Acts 15, which we shall examine below, the apostles, plus the elders of the churches of Jerusalem, plus the entire membership of those churches, all gathered together to consider the dispute between Paul and the ‘Judaisers’ and to decide, once and for all, whether the Law had ended or not. And they all came down firmly on Paul’s side. That is beyond dispute, as we shall see shortly.

We can be quite certain that not only the apostles but also many of the men who were now leaders of the churches in Jerusalem, plus very many of the ordinary members, had been present at the Sermon on the Mount and had heard Jesus speak about His interpretation of the Law. I would guess that a hundred people at the Jerusalem Council had heard Jesus that day. But if not, there must have been at least twenty or thirty, including the apostles.

The point is if any of them had thought that what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount meant the Law could not possibly have ended then *they would have said so*. At least some of them would have stood up and said to the apostles and other leaders of the Jerusalem churches: “*You can’t possibly say the Law has ended because our clear understanding of the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus has not come to abolish it and that it must therefore continue until Heaven and earth pass away.*”

But nobody said that. Neither did any of the apostles who had been in the front row when Jesus said what He said. None of them thought the fact that Jesus did not intend to abolish (or destroy) the Law

meant it could never be accomplished or fulfilled or come to an end in any other way. None of them pulled out their mobile phones to go on Twitter to make that claim, as so many do today.

Surely that speaks volumes as to how they interpreted Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17-18. It proves they did not think He meant the Law of Moses could not end until Heaven and Earth had passed away. If they did think that then why did they all agree with Paul in Acts 15 that the Law had already ended?

There is no getting around this. Evidently, they had not forgotten that Jesus said He came to "fulfil" the Law and used the words "until all is accomplished" and they understood the obvious meaning of those words.

An analogy of paying off a mortgage and thus 'fulfilling' it and yet without criticising it or wishing to 'destroy' it

An analogy from a legal or financial context might help to explain how someone can intend to fulfil something, accomplish its purpose, and bring it to an end, and yet make no criticism of it and have no intention of destroying it or throwing it down. Imagine a man has a house, over which there is a mortgage, such that he owes £100,000 to a bank. Then that man makes regular payments all perfectly on time and in the full amount over a number of years whereby he reduces the debt owed to the bank.

Then imagine that he has reached the final monthly payment under his mortgage agreement and he now wishes to pay off the remainder of the mortgage. Picture the scene therefore when he walks into the bank to make the final payment. That man might say: "*I have not come to destroy or throw down or abolish my mortgage, but to fulfil it*".

He is not denying the legality or validity of the mortgage, or criticising it in any way. Neither is he saying he intends to smash it or damage it. He is simply saying that, even though the mortgage at present is perfectly valid and legal, and serves a valuable purpose, he intends to bring it to an end *when all is accomplished*. That time of fulfilment will be the moment when He has made the final repayment and therefore perfectly observed all the terms of the mortgage.

I do not wish to be irreverent, but some audiences have found this analogy helpful and it has enabled the 'penny to drop' such that they can then see how Jesus can have spoken as positively as He did about the Law of Moses, and about having no intention to destroy it or throw it down whilst, at the same time, fully intending to bring it to an end as soon as He has fulfilled it and accomplished everything required by it.

Does Matthew 5:19-20 mean the Law of Moses is still in operation?

Now let us turn to look at verses 19 and 20 of Matthew chapter 5. Hopefully, these will not take so long to explain now that we have a fuller understanding of what Jesus was saying in verses 17 to 18.

¹⁹ Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:19-20 (RSV)

Remember that when Jesus spoke these words, the Law of Moses *was still in operation*. Jesus had not yet died and therefore had not yet lived *an entire lifetime* in perfect observance of the Law. That being so, He had not yet accomplished everything He needed to do in obeying the Law while on Earth and thus He had not yet (at that time) fulfilled it.

Given that it was then still in operation, it was the duty of every Jew to observe every detail of the Law. It was also entirely proper for Jesus to say *at that time* that no one should relax or alter any part of it – until, of course, it had been fulfilled, i.e. when all had been accomplished by Him.

So, as the Law had not yet come to an end, it was of course essential that He should confirm that it was fully in operation. He also needed to condemn anyone who, *at that time*, relaxed any of its provisions – because they were all still in force and could not be altered in any way.

However, the point is that ceased to be the case after He had fulfilled the Law by accomplishing everything it required. From that moment on it became absolutely right to relax its commandments *because they had then come to an end*. Indeed, it became necessary to bring the Law to an end completely, not merely to relax its provisions.

As for verse 20, the point is that even the Scribes and Pharisees were failing to observe the Law perfectly. Indeed, they were missing the mark by a very long way, not only by failing to obey the Law of Moses, but also by adding to it a vast array of illegitimate man made rules called the “*oral law*” that they and their ancestors had invented for themselves. These extra rules were not part of the Law of Moses and were not valid. That is why Jesus refused to obey them which, in turn, caused many of the Pharisees to hate Him.

Accordingly, in saying our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus was firstly saying, in a roundabout way, that those men were not actually righteous. Secondly, He was saying they were not obeying the Law of Moses anyway. And thirdly, He was also saying the only form of righteousness that is acceptable to God, and that will achieve salvation for us, is *His* righteousness, not the pathetic self-righteousness we might seek to achieve for ourselves by attempting to comply with the Law.

Therefore, it is entirely true to say that a person will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless their righteousness is greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, *because they didn't have any righteousness* and because the righteousness we need has to be equal to that of Jesus Himself. In other words it has to be absolute righteousness at a level none of us can ever achieve – whether we are Pharisees or not.

The point is of course that we can only achieve that level of perfect righteousness by having it *transferred or imputed to us*, as a gift. We are entirely incapable of achieving or earning it for ourselves, by any means, no matter how hard we try.

So, Jesus is not saying we cannot go to Heaven. He is saying we cannot go to Heaven *on the basis of our own self-righteousness, that we have earned for ourselves*, in the way that some of the Pharisees were trying to do. It has to be through Him and on the basis of receiving His righteousness as a free gift, by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Him alone. That is the only way. Now let us turn to another so-called problem passage, this time in Luke chapter 16.

Does Luke 16:16-17 mean the Law of Moses is still in operation?

¹⁶ *“The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently. ¹⁷ But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void.*

Luke 16:16-17 (RSV)

These famous verses are also frequently referred to by those who argue the Law of Moses is still in operation and that we are still bound by it. In fact, they do not support that argument at all. As for verse 16, it actually assists in showing that a seismic change was set in motion with the arrival of John the Baptist who was the forerunner to Jesus and came to prepare the way for the Lord.

When John came he announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand, which Jesus also announced, because at that time, after many centuries of waiting, the Kingdom was being offered to the Jewish people. So, a profound change had occurred from the position as it had been in the Old Testament era.

The people were being offered the Kingdom and Jesus the Messiah to be their King. Sadly, their leaders rejected Him, even though many of them knew perfectly well that He was the Messiah, because they didn't like the kind of Messiah he was shaping up to be. See my audio series on Matthew's gospel for fuller detail about why they knowingly rejected their Messiah.

At any rate, John the Baptist's ministry was a key turning point in God's plans for Israel but it was not John's arrival, or death, which triggered the ending of the Law of Moses. That only came with Jesus' death.

So, the phrase *“the law and the prophets were until John”* is meant in a looser, more approximate sense, as it was actually Jesus' death which ended the Law. Yet, it is true to say that John was the final Old Testament prophet and his message was all about pointing to Jesus and the huge changes He was about to make.

Nevertheless, Jesus then says it is *“easier for Heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void”*. However, in the light of what has been said above, we can now see much more clearly what Jesus meant.

The point is that nothing at all will ever cause any part of God's Word to *fail*, or to be *made void*, or to be rendered *illegitimate*. Nothing and nobody is capable of doing that. To be 'made void' is a negative expression and has the same implication we looked at earlier of the Law being declared invalid or being thrown down or destroyed. As we have seen, that will never happen.

So, the Law of Moses could not possibly end in any negative manner, as if it had been faulty or unsatisfactory. Its ending, when it came, was wholly positive. It will only come to an end, or be cancelled *when it has been fulfilled and accomplished*. That is what Jesus Himself had already told us in Matthew 5:17-18.

Until and unless that happens, then God's Word will continue in full force and nothing and nobody can undermine it, invalidate it or change it. Nobody has the power or authority to do any of that. The only thing that could bring the Law of Moses to an end was for Jesus Himself to accomplish its purpose and fulfil it – which He did at His death. But no person or event could ever render it void or illegitimate.

Therefore, Luke 16:16-17 does not mean the Law of Moses has not ceased, or that it will never cease, because we must have regard to the other things Jesus also said which qualified or modified these statements made here in verses 16-17. Those other statements made it clear that the Law of Moses was *time-limited*, i.e. that it was a *temporary covenant*, and would come to an end when it was fulfilled by Jesus.

Some other verses which are often misunderstood or misused

Let us turn now to another verse which is mistakenly used by those who claim we are still subject to the Law of Moses. It is Acts 21:24, in which we are told that Paul lives “*in observance of the law*”. At first glance, it seems to suggest that Paul thinks he is under the Law:

²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law.

Acts 21:24 (RSV)

As with all apparently contradictory verses in the Bible, the key to understanding it correctly is to look at it *in context*. The context for Acts 21:24 is the whole passage from Acts 21:17 to Acts 26:32 in which Paul is defending himself from various charges made against him, in particular the allegation that he had been teaching “*all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs*”.

That was a lie and Paul had not been teaching any of that. He had never said Jewish parents should not circumcise their sons. Neither had he ever said they should “*forsake Moses*”. On the contrary, *when Paul was amongst unbelieving Jews* (i.e. those who had not yet accepted Jesus as their Messiah) he lived and acted as a Jew, carefully observing their customs, and eating as they did, in compliance with the Law.

However, Paul only observed the Law *when he was with Jews*. *And he only did that in order not to offend them* or to create a stumbling block such that they would then reject the Gospel as a result of being upset by his conduct or by what he ate. It was therefore a matter of diplomacy on his part, so as not to needlessly offend any Jew. It was not because Paul thought he had any duty to observe the Law.

But such observance was not necessary, or appropriate, when he was amongst Gentiles, with whom he would eat whatever was put in front of him and ignore all the requirements of the Law. Indeed, had he observed the Law when with Gentiles he would have created the opposite problem and offended and alienated them. That is why Paul chose to observe the Law when with Jews, even though it had ended, such that *neither he, nor they, nor anyone else, was actually required to observe it*. His observance was purely voluntary.

Why did apostle Paul claim to “uphold the Law”?

We now come to another important statement by Paul which many people misunderstand and misuse to suggest he was saying the Law was still in operation:

³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Romans 3:31 (RSV)

When Paul says the Gospel message is not a basis for us to ‘overthrow’ the Law and that, on the contrary, he upholds the Law, he is making the same point Jesus made in Matthew 5:17-20 in His Sermon on the Mount. He is not criticising the Law or seeking to destroy it. On the contrary, he honours it and gives it his full respect. Paul is simply saying that Jesus has fulfilled it and brought it to an end.

It is also the same point I made earlier in the analogy about paying off a mortgage. That is, you would not refer to yourself in negative terms as ‘destroying’ or ‘overthrowing’ your mortgage, but simply as fulfilling it, completing it or paying it off, such that it ceases to exist. That is despite the fact that, while it prevailed, it was perfectly legal and served a valuable purpose.

So, Paul is ‘upholding’ the Law in the sense that he fully supports the purpose it had while still in operation. But none of that is inconsistent with Paul also saying the Law has ended. Likewise, one could say the reign of Queen Elizabeth ended in 2022 whilst still speaking positively about her 70 year reign and ‘upholding’ it, praising it, and doing nothing to overthrow it or criticise it.

In every sense, Paul is in favour of the Law, *provided we understand its purpose, which is to show us our sin, not to save us from it.* Accordingly, there is no contradiction between ‘upholding’ the Law, in the sense of honouring it, recognising its proper purpose, and approving of what that purpose used to be while, at the same time, saying *that it has ended and we are no longer under it.*

To use a legal example, in the United Kingdom, until 1968, the law of theft was governed by what was known as The Larceny Act 1916. However, that was then repealed and replaced by The Theft Act 1968. Therefore, if one was to say that The Larceny Act no longer applied, and was no longer the law of the land, that would not be a criticism of The Larceny Act, or an attempt to allege that it had been void, invalid or illegitimate. It is merely a statement of fact that it has ended and been replaced, without implying anything disparaging.

A series of verses which support what apostle Paul says in Galatians

Having dealt with what I call the ‘problem passages’, which might appear at first sight to contradict Paul, we shall now move on to examine a long list of other verses and passages which undoubtedly support his message in the letter to the Galatians. In particular, they all add to the mountain of proof that the Law has ended. Here Jesus is speaking in John’s gospel:

19 Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?”
John 7:19 (RSV)

I stated earlier that nobody except Jesus had ever perfectly observed the Law and you might have wondered what my authority was for saying that. Well, this verse in John chapter 7 is one such authority, and it comes from Jesus himself. He says, as clearly as it is possible to be, that “*none of you keeps the law*”. It is plain from His words that nobody, at least in that generation in the whole of Israel, was keeping the Law i.e. keeping it properly.

So, if all the best people in Israel at that time, such as Nicodemus or Nathanael, or even John the Baptist, were unable to keep the Law, then on what conceivable basis can you, or anyone else, have the slightest hope of being able to do so? Moreover, if you agree that you cannot possibly succeed in observing the Law, why on Earth would you want to be under it and what could you hope to gain from forlornly attempting to obey it?

To break it even in one small detail, and even on one occasion, will cause you to be classified by God as a lawbreaker. If so, then you will have failed to observe it and gained nothing from attempting to do so. On the contrary, you will have brought yourself under God's curse, or at least aroused His opposition, for having placed yourself under the Law but then failing to observe it.

If the Law of Moses has ended what does Jesus now want us to obey?

²¹ He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?”²³ Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”²⁴ He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

John 14:21-24 (RSV)

This passage above has the potential to confuse people in that it could be claimed it suggests we must continue to obey the Law because Jesus speaks of us needing to keep His commandments. However, what is being referred to here is not the Law of Moses but the commands Jesus gives, and which the Bible as a whole gives. These all come under the general heading of the '*Law of Christ*, the '*Law of Liberty*' or the '*Royal Law*'.

We are certainly obliged to obey Jesus and to do His will as set out in the Bible. However, that is not the same as trying to observe the Law of Moses, which has ended, and is now impossible to keep anyway, even if you were a perfect person.

For one thing, the Temple no longer exists. Therefore, the many commandments under the Law which relate to the Temple and to the sacrificial system, *cannot be complied with*, no matter how hard you try. So, when Jesus speaks of requiring us to keep His commandments and keep His Word, He does not mean the Law of Moses. *He means all the other commands, which have not ended.*

But let us look also at why He wants us to obey Him. As we can see above at verse 21, obedience to Jesus Christ is the key indicator that a person loves Him, because to disobey Him is inconsistent with loving Him. So, we are to obey Jesus Christ for a number of reasons, one of which is to prove our love for Him.

But the one thing that is not, and never can be, a reason for obeying His commands is to *earn or achieve righteousness*. The righteousness that is needed for us to be saved does not come from obedience, even to the Law of Christ, let alone the Law of Moses. It can only come from putting our faith in Jesus Christ and receiving His righteousness which is transferred from Him to us as a free gift. You can't generate your own righteousness for yourself and seek to rely on that.

What does it mean for the ending of the Law that the curtain in the Temple was “torn in two from top to bottom”?

I now want to turn to an incident which few people ever talk about and which even fewer realise has anything to do with the ending of the Law. I refer to the strange account given in Matthew and Luke of the curtain in the Temple being “*torn in two from top to bottom*”. This happened when Jesus died on the cross:

⁵⁰ *And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and gave up His spirit* ⁵¹ *And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.*

Matthew 27:50-51 (NASB)

⁴⁴ *It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the entire land until the ninth hour,* ⁴⁵ *because the sun stopped shining; and the veil of the temple was torn in two.*

Luke 23:44-45 (NASB)

This huge curtain in the Temple was about sixty feet tall, going right up from the floor to the ceiling of that vast building and it was also *four inches thick* to make sure that no light could get through it. It separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

That curtain had been there ever since the Second Temple was built and it was essential that it should remain there, undamaged, to enable various things to be done in the Temple that were necessary to observe the Law of Moses. In particular, the High Priest needed it.

And yet it was obviously torn in two either *by God Himself or by an angel* on His instructions. That must be so because no man could have reached high enough to cut the curtain. Very long extending ladders from the Fire Brigade would have been needed, plus specialist cutting equipment.

Moreover, it occurred at the same moment as God blackened the sun and also sent an earthquake which shook the ground and split rocks. The fact that it happened simultaneously with all those things further confirms that the cutting of the curtain was a miracle and that God did it, in which case, it must follow that *God wanted it to happen*. But why would He want to do that if the Law was still in force?

In any case, the curtain was too difficult for a man to cut, being four inches thick. It would be harder than cutting through a very big book and then repeating the exercise more than 60 times. Therefore, it was obviously done supernaturally. There is no getting away from that. But if God did do it, or if He ordered it to be done, we can hardly tell Him He did wrong or made a mistake. It was clearly done for a specific purpose and with God's full consent.

The question, therefore, is why? What was the purpose of cutting the curtain? In particular, what did this incident imply for the status and continuance of the Law? The answer is clear. It fits perfectly with the Law coming to an end at Jesus' death, which, according to both Matthew and Luke, is the very moment when the curtain was cut. From then on the curtain was no longer necessary because the High Priest no longer needed to offer sacrifices or do any of the other things that the Law required.

But can you see that if the Law had *not* ended, and if we are still under it, and all the sacrifices in the Temple need to continue, why would God cut this vitally important curtain in two and make the Temple unusable? Or, to be more precise, why would God render the Temple unfit to be used in a way which *complied with the Law*?

There can only be one reason for God to cause the Temple to be unusable and that is because it was *no longer needed* – because the Law had ended. I accept that this one point alone might not convince you, but if you put the curtain incident alongside all the other proofs contained in this article, it adds yet further to the weight of the argument and makes the case for the ending of the Law even more undeniable.

Perhaps its biggest contribution to this debate is that the cutting of the curtain shows that the ending of the Law was something which God *wanted* and which *He Himself brought about*, as opposed to just being something which apostle Paul considered necessary. In a sense it adds God the Father to our long

list of supporters of apostle Paul, alongside Peter, the 12 apostles, James the Just and the entire Jerusalem Council.

The revelation given to Peter about the Law of Moses, long before Paul's letter to the Galatians

We shall now look at a passage concerning Peter from Acts chapter 10, verses 9-16. It happens after Paul's conversion, but long before he wrote Galatians. Apostle Peter has a vision of various 'unclean' animals which the Law of Moses forbade Jews to eat. Then Peter is told he *can* now eat all of these animals, and they are no longer forbidden.

Some of us just take this to mean Peter can now eat all kinds of meat and say "So what?" and leave it at that. It does not occur to some of us that the clear implication of this change is that the entire Law must also have ended. But if you stop and think for a moment it becomes obvious because, if God is saying there are no longer any food laws then the rest of the Law has to have ended too because, as we have seen, the Law is one complete whole.

It is all or nothing, and to remove any part of it, however small, would be to bring it all to an end. Therefore, long before Paul got involved in the Galatian controversy, it was *already clear the Law had ended*:

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

Acts 10:9-14 (RSV)

Note how astonished Peter is by this vision and how strongly he resists it, to such an extent he actually says "No" to God. Peter does so because the obviousness of the need to obey the food laws, which are central to the Law is so deeply ingrained he cannot imagine not being required to do so. In particular, he could not cope with the idea of eating types of meat which had been forbidden to Jews for over 1500 years. Therefore, God had to repeat this startling message three times to get it to sink in to Peter's mind:

¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Acts 10:15-16 (RSV)

The purpose of this vision, however, was not only to reveal to Peter that the strict dietary rules within the Law had ended. It was also to show that he must no longer consider himself unable to mix with, or eat with, Gentiles. That was essential because it was now God's intention to bring the Gospel to the whole Gentile world and that made it necessary for Jews to feel free to eat with Gentiles.

You will recall, that in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus had already given us the 'Great Commission', by which He commanded His followers to "make disciples of all nations". That in itself obviously made it necessary for the Jews to begin to mix with Gentiles and indeed to go far and wide to witness to them.

The key point is these changes to the food laws carried the clear implication that the whole Law had ended. It would make no sense otherwise. Like many of us, Peter found it very difficult to absorb such a command or to consider it possible that God really meant something as extraordinary as that.

I ought to make clear that, as far as I can see, none of the 613 commands of the Law of Moses actually forbade any Jew from mixing with, or even eating with Gentiles. The real issue was food, not Gentiles themselves. In other words, it was really a cultural barrier that had built up, not a legal one.

The Jews felt unable to mix with Gentiles, and especially to eat with them, as it could lead to difficulties if non kosher food was presented to them or even food which might be alright but which they couldn't be certain about. So, it was considered easier just to avoid Gentiles altogether.

The Council meeting in Jerusalem, in Acts 15, at which the status of the Law of Moses was discussed

We now move on several years after Peter's vision to when a very large Council meeting took place in Jerusalem, involving the whole Jerusalem church. I believe this Council took place after Paul had written Galatians, because if it had occurred earlier he would surely have referred to it in Galatians to further prove his case. But he never did.

This conference was held to decide once and for all what the current status of the Law of Moses was and whether Gentiles in particular were required to obey it in order to be saved. This Council is so important that Luke devotes almost the whole of chapter 15 of the book of Acts to explaining what happened at the meeting, why it was called, and what the result was.

If I am right about the timing of this large Council meeting, it took place after Paul had written Galatians. Therefore, in supporting Paul they were not only agreeing with him about the status of the Law but also endorsing his letter to the Galatians which they would, almost certainly, have read.

This meeting in Jerusalem is of enormous importance in terms of the support it gives to Paul on whether the Law had ended. Acts 15 shows Paul had the support not only of the apostles and James, *but of the entire Jerusalem church*. They came down firmly against the 'circumcision party' on this issue. Let us now go through most of Acts 15 in detail, as it is so important:

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:1 (RSV)

The controversy began in Antioch, (see Acts 14:26-28) when some men, by which Luke means Jewish believers in Jesus, or Messianic Jews as we would now call them, came from Judea and began agitating in the churches in opposition to apostle Paul. They were of the 'circumcision party', also known as 'Judaizers' and were insisting that Gentile believers in Jesus must be circumcised or else they could not be saved.

Note firstly, that they said this must be done "*according to the custom of Moses*". Thus, they were plainly not referring to circumcision that was done to comply with the Abrahamic Covenant. The circumcision required under the Abrahamic Covenant was for Jewish males only, and was valid and necessary. Moreover, it is still in force today.

It is done to signify that they are part of the Jewish race and thus inheritors of the promises made to Abraham in relation to his *physical descendants* through Isaac and Jacob. So, beyond all doubt, what the circumcision party was speaking about here was that Gentile men must be circumcised in accordance with the *Law of Moses*, (also known as the Mosaic Covenant), not the Abrahamic Covenant.

When they spoke of circumcision being required for salvation they did not *only* mean the literal physical act of circumcision, but also observance of the *whole Law of Moses, of which circumcision was one part, but which stood for, or signified, the whole Law.*

Therefore, it would have been bad enough if the early Church had given in to the Judaisers and agreed to circumcision, and nothing else, being required for Gentiles. However, it actually meant far more than that because, to them, circumcision also *represented* observance of the whole Law of Moses. It is a shorthand expression for observance of the entire Law, not just circumcision alone.

Thankfully, Paul was asked to go up to Jerusalem to address this controversy and he intervened on behalf of all Gentile believers. Had he not done so, the whole Church might have gone astray ever since and we, even today, might have been living like Old Testament Jews trying forlornly to obey the Law of Moses.

² And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Acts 15:2 (RSV)

In Antioch the circumcision party caused such a lot of unrest, the churches asked Paul and Barnabas to go to see the apostles and the elders of the churches in Jerusalem to find out what they had to say about this issue. The fact that the people in Antioch did not take Paul's word for this and believe him, rather than the Judaisers, shows how effective they were at unsettling people and creating confusion.

It is no different today. A great many church members are instantly willing to accept the bogus arguments of those who teach that we must observe the Law, or at least parts of it, and give little or no scrutiny to those arguments.

³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:3-4 (RSV)

Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the Jerusalem church who were delighted that so many Gentiles were accepting the Gospel. Indeed, so were the believers in Phoenicia and Samaria, through which Paul passed on his way to Jerusalem. Word must have spread around about the vision given to Peter that Jews could eat with Gentiles without regard to the food laws.

However, not everyone in the Jerusalem church was happy to see Paul and Barnabas or to hear what they had to say. Some Pharisees who had accepted Jesus as Messiah, but who were members of the circumcision party, began to cause trouble:

⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.”

Acts 15:5 (RSV)

The circumcision party were active in Jerusalem too and reignited the debate by insisting that these new Gentile converts must be circumcised. Luke says in Acts 15:5 that they were insisting that any Gentiles who came into the Church must also *keep the Law of Moses*, thereby proving ‘circumcision’ was code for observance of the whole Law.

This issue was considered so important the apostles, or at least all who were in Jerusalem at the time, together with the elders of all the churches in Jerusalem, gathered to come to a decision about it:

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:6 (RSV)

The debate was conducted in front of *the entire Jerusalem church*, not just the leaders. Moreover, as we shall see (in verse 22 below), it was the *church as a whole* which made the decision to support Paul and reject the arguments of the circumcision party.

⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:7-9 (RSV)

We see from verses 7 to 9 that after the debate had been going on for a long time, apostle Peter reminded everyone of the dramatic development in the very early days of the Church, as set out in Acts chapter 10, when God made clear that salvation was now to be made available to the Gentiles.

In verse 9 Peter also makes the startling statement that, as from that point, so far as salvation was concerned, God “*made no distinction between us and them*”. It is hard for us as Gentiles, nearly 2000 years later, to see the astonishing significance of these words. Every Jew knew, and had always known, that salvation was only available to the Jews.

Therefore, even in this preliminary statement in the debate, Peter was making an assertion which could not be made if the Law was still in operation, because it would have required those Gentile converts to become Jews.

¹⁰ Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

Acts 15:10 (RSV)

In verse 10, Peter goes so far as to describe the Law as a “*yoke*”, which is something placed around the neck of an ox so it can pull a heavy burden or a plough. He is describing the Law as a burden, and one which no Jew had ever been able to bear, because it is impossible for a sinner to do so.

¹¹ But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Acts 15:11 (RSV)

Peter then makes a statement in verse 11 above which many of us would associate more with apostle Paul, namely that salvation is through *grace*, not by keeping the Law or any other kind of works. At the end of the verse he makes an even more radical statement which underscores the message of Acts chapter 10, when he says “*just as they will*”.

Peter is saying that salvation is now achieved by Gentiles in exactly the same way as it must be achieved by the Jews. If that is so, there can be no place for the Law of Moses, because it was aimed at the Jews and was for the Jews only.

¹² And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15:12 (RSV)

After Peter had finished, Barnabas and Paul told the Council in verse 12 about the wonderful things happening amongst the Gentiles, and how they were being saved, but also how miraculous signs and wonders were taking place amongst them. This was said to prove that God Himself was behind this remarkable development and to confirm that a dramatic change had occurred.

But the point is the change was *inconsistent with the continuation of the Law*. In other words, it was impossible for all these things to happen amongst the Gentiles and yet for the Law of Moses to carry on.

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brethren, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

Acts 15:13-14 (RSV)

Finally, after all the other speakers had finished, James, the half-brother of Jesus, spoke in verse 13 to sum up the debate and give his view as the leader of the Jerusalem church. By ‘Simeon’ he means Peter, whose full name was Simon Peter, and he agrees with him that God has now “visited the Gentiles” and they are being saved.

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.²¹ For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues.”

Acts 15:19-21 (RSV)

In verse 19 above we now come to the key point in the whole debate when James states “*we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God*”. He means he is disagreeing with the circumcision party and confirming that Gentiles are *not* obliged to keep the Law and must not be put under that burden.

Verse 20 is also hugely significant in that James spells out a very short list of things the Gentiles should be urged to refrain from. But that list is nothing like the Law, either in its length or its contents. We need to zoom in on verse 20 and examine it because it is so easy, when we read the Bible, to just ‘drive past’ at 70 miles per hour and not notice that something important has been said.

The point is if the Law was still in operation, how could James have possibly been willing to make the statements he makes in verse 20? What he says *is directly contradicting the Law of Moses*, because that goes way further than the handful of instructions he gives.

In other words, James could not conceivably make that statement if he thought the Law was still in operation because the advice he gives does not even come remotely close to enabling the Gentiles to observe it.

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,²³ with the following letter: "The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cili'cia, greeting.

Acts 15:22-23 (RSV)

We see from verse 22 above that Paul had the support of "*the apostles*", which means more than only Peter, because it is in the plural. But he also had the support of "*the elders*", which is again in the plural, and above all, he had the support of "*the whole church*".

The Council meeting concluded with a letter being written which Paul could bring back with him to Antioch, together with Judas and Silas, who were leading figures in the Jerusalem church. These would then prove to the circumcision party, and to all of the Gentile converts whom they were troubling, that Paul had the support of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem and of the whole Jerusalem church. The greeting is set out above, at verse 23, but here, from verse 24 to 29, is the substance of that crucial letter:

24 Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions,²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:24-27 (RSV)

Verses 24 to 27 essentially make the following key points:

- a) some men have come from Jerusalem to Antioch
- b) they have been troubling the Gentiles and unsettling their minds
- c) however, the Jerusalem church did *not* instruct them to do so
- d) therefore, the circumcision party are acting on their own account, without our approval
- e) we are sending Paul and Barnabas back to you in Antioch
- f) we are expressing our approval of Paul and Barnabas
- g) we are also sending Judas and Silas to confirm the conclusions of the Council
- h) thus, by letter and in person, we confirm that we all agree with Paul

The letter then continues from verse 28 to 29. These are also crucial verses because it would be impossible to give only these few brief instructions if the Law was still in operation:

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”
Acts 15:28-29 (RSV)

This confirms that the only ‘burdens’ that should be placed upon the Gentile converts are as follows:

- a) abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols
- b) do not eat blood
- c) do not eat meat from animals that were strangled
- d) avoid unchastity

Look closely at that tiny little list and consider the hundreds of things that are *not in it*, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, keeping the feasts of Israel, dress codes, dietary requirements and many other things. Clearly, if any of those things were still meant to be observed the letter would have included them. It would be unthinkable not to include them. But the point is it did not do so. Their absence therefore speaks very loudly to us.

The key point, therefore, is not what *is in* that little list sent out by the Jerusalem Council, but what *is not in it*. We can be certain that if the Sabbath was still obligatory for us, or circumcision, or dietary laws, or keeping the feasts of Israel, and so on, then someone at the Council meeting would have immediately stood up and said, with indignation, “*But James, you’ve forgotten the Sabbath*”, or whatever else they thought had been overlooked.

But nobody did stand up and say any such thing, and the fact that they didn’t is crucial as we consider whether the Law is still in operation. One thing is certain – if it was still in operation then James and the other leaders could not possibly have sent out that short letter for Paul to bring to Antioch.

They would all have seen instantly that it was completely inconsistent with the Law of Moses, and that it would be unthinkable to send it if the Law was still operative. But they did send it and, what’s more, it was well received in Antioch:

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Acts 15:30-35 (RSV)

In verses 30 to 35 we see the very positive response Paul received when he arrived in Antioch and showed the churches the letter from the Council. The believers in Antioch, both Jews and Gentiles, accepted that the debate about the Law had now been fully dealt with and that Paul was right and the Judaisers were wrong. If only more Christians could accept that today.

That being so, it was not Paul who lacked authority and authenticity on this issue, but the Judaisers. It was they, not he, who were defying God’s will. Sadly, many Christians are doing the same today without realising they are wrong *but they are, nevertheless, wrong*.

Why did Paul circumcise Timothy but not Titus?

It is important to understand why Paul circumcised Timothy, but not Titus. Here is the relevant passage concerning Timothy:

¹ And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Ico'nium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Acts 16:1-3 (RSV)

Timothy had a Jewish mother but a Gentile father. Therefore, he had not been circumcised as a baby, as he would have been if he had had two Jewish parents. When Paul discovered this omission after Timothy's conversion he felt it necessary for Timothy to be circumcised.

However, Timothy's circumcision was not done in accordance with the Law of Moses, *but with the Abrahamic covenant*. It was done to bring Timothy within the promise made to Abraham in connection with his *physical descendants through Isaac and Jacob*, and concerning the land in particular.

In that regard, but only in that regard, circumcision is still needed for Jewish males. Otherwise, they would be "cut off" i.e. not considered to be Jews in God's eyes. Therefore, Timothy needed to be circumcised because the Abrahamic covenant required it *and, for Jews, that requirement has not ended, even today*.

But, at Galatians 2:3, Paul said "... *Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised.....*". The explanation for that apparent difference of treatment is very simple. Timothy was a Jew but Titus was a Gentile. Therefore, Timothy needed circumcision to be brought within the Abrahamic covenant but Titus did not, *as he was not a Jew*. So, there really is no contradiction here at all.

The letter to the Romans also deals with the ending of the Law of Moses

Paul's letter to the Romans supports what he is saying in Galatians. All I want to do here is to focus on a few passages which address the current status of the Law:

²⁵ Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

Romans 2:25 (RSV)

Paul means that getting circumcised, and thus obligating yourself to obey the whole Law, will only benefit you if you then go on to obey the entire Law at all times. If you break it in any way at any time you make yourself as if you were uncircumcised because you would be considered a 'lawbreaker' in God's eyes. That is because the Law is an '*all or nothing*' system. Unless you obey all of it at all times then you are a lawbreaker, just the same as someone who obeys none of it.

In chapter 3 of Romans Paul goes on to explain how salvation is based upon faith, not 'works', and that no person can ever be saved by observing the Law. That is because it is not, and never was, the purpose of the Law to provide salvation. Its principal purpose is simply to show us we are sinners and that we *need salvation*, not to be the means by which we obtain it:

²⁰ For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Romans 3:20 (RSV)

Paul then goes on to explain how salvation is by grace, as a gift from God, based purely on faith, not works, because all of us are sinners in the sense that we “*fall short of the glory of God*”, i.e. fail to match up to His standards. That is why it was essential for God to provide a means of salvation that was not about obeying laws or rules, which we all find impossible.

It needed to be something that was simply on the basis of faith. Then any of us can easily be saved if we want to be, no matter how poor or uneducated we might be. Therefore, God now saves, or justifies, anyone who repents and has faith in Jesus Christ, i.e. puts their trust in Him to save them.

Moreover, *so far as salvation is concerned*, He no longer makes any distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Of course, in His dealings with the land of Israel and the specific promises to the physical descendants of Jacob, He continues to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles. And those who believe in ‘replacement theology’ urgently need to recognise that:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:21-26 (RSV)

Paul then goes on to explain how the Gospel takes away any basis for boasting, because the righteousness we receive is transferred to us as a free gift. It is not based on any good works we have done, whether under the Law of Moses or otherwise, but simply on repenting of our sins and believing in Jesus Christ, not merely to believe He exists, but to put our entire trust in Him to save us.

Accordingly, we are now all in exactly the same situation so far as salvation is concerned, whether we are Jews or Gentiles. God will ‘justify’ or ‘save’ each of us solely on the basis of faith. Keeping the Law has nothing to do with it and provides no advantage.

Therefore, as we see below, ‘the circumcised’, which is a shorthand expression to refer to the Jewish people, and ‘the uncircumcised’, which means the Gentiles, are all in the same boat and must all be saved by faith and by no other means:

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

Romans 3:27-30 (RSV)

A crucial verse in which Paul explicitly says “we are not under law”

In Romans 6:15, Paul makes an unmistakably clear statement that we are not under the Law of Moses:

*¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!
Romans 6:15 (RSV)*

One wonders how Paul could be any clearer than he is in this verse when he explicitly states “...*because we are not under law but under grace...*”. How could he possibly make that statement *if we were under the Law?* It would make no sense.

What frequently confuses people is how to make sense of the fact that the Law has ended, and we are now under grace, not law, and yet it is still wrong for us to sin. A confused person might assume that if the Law has ended, that must mean we are free to do as we please. But we are not, and we will look at why that is.

The meanings of ‘legalism’, ‘licence’ and ‘liberty’

There are three widely misunderstood words, all of which begin with the letter L, namely *legalism*, *licence*, and *liberty*. Let us look briefly at each of these and seek to define them and distinguish them from each other.

That will help us to see how we can, at the same time, have complete liberty, free from any bondage or legalism, and yet still be required to obey God’s commands, as set out in the Bible, together with our conscience and also the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Taken together, we might regard these things that we are still required to obey as ‘the Law of Christ’, (also referred to as the ‘Law of Liberty’ or the ‘Royal Law’).

Let’s look at the three “L” words and define them:

- a) ‘*Legalism*’ is where a person seeks by observance of the Law of Moses, or any other set of rules or traditions, *to achieve righteousness for themselves, by their own efforts*. It does *not* mean, *seeking to be obedient to God, or the Bible*. We are meant to obey God, and to study and obey the Bible. It is simply that our doing so *is not the means by which we are justified or made righteous*. It is what a genuine Christian does, after he has already been saved.
- b) ‘*Licence*’, from which we get the words licentious and licentiousness, is the belief that we are entitled to do whatever we want, and there are no boundaries, restrictions or prohibitions which prevent us from pleasing ourselves, and even sinning, if we want to. Therefore, a person who misunderstands the concepts of grace and liberty frequently imagines that these mean God no longer expects to be obeyed and that our sins have no consequences and we will not be judged or punished for them.

That is a grievous error and is absolutely not what is meant by grace or liberty. Above all, it is not a proper inference to draw from the ending of the Law of Moses. We are certainly free from the duty to observe that, but we are not free from the duty to obey the Law of Christ, i.e. to follow our conscience and the Bible and the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Neither are we free from the prospect of God's impending judgment which applies to Christians as well as unsaved unbelievers. So, we do have to obey the Law of Christ but anyone who properly understands the Law of Christ would not want to be free from it.

- c) 'Liberty' is the position a Christian is in once he realises he is no longer bound by the Law and he gives up any idea of trying to earn righteousness for himself. Instead he accepts the righteousness of Jesus Christ being imputed or transferred to him as a free gift. Once that has occurred, that person is, in God's eyes, as righteous as Jesus Christ, with all his sins forgiven. He is also 'adopted' into God's family, as a son, whom God then regards and treats as an adult.

It is as we saw in the analogy I used in my commentary on Galatians of the differences between a student nurse who has just started her training and a qualified nurse who has been doing the job for 10 years. That fully qualified nurse is not told exactly what to do and how to do it, as the Law of Moses told us.

Instead she has liberty to think for herself, apply all her experience, exercise her judgement and do her job as she sees fit. That approach accords with how the Law of Christ operates, leaving us free to apply all of God's principles and commands to the various situations and circumstances we might face and to decide for ourselves, with the Holy Spirit's help, what we ought to do.

Likewise, what the fully qualified nurse *sees fit* to do will be to operate in accordance with all her accumulated reservoir of knowledge and understanding of appropriate medical techniques and practices, *not just to suit herself, do as she pleases, cut corners, look after number one or follow the line of least resistance.*

Therefore, that qualified nurse does not operate either in legalism or licence but in liberty. She is left alone to get on with the job, without anyone telling her exactly what to do at any given moment. However, she knows that although she is free, she is still bound by her duties to the patient, to the hospital, and to God Himself and she would not want it otherwise.

Accordingly, she does not use her liberty as an excuse for taking life easy, neglecting patients, stealing from the hospital, arriving late or leaving early or any other such selfish things. She has the maturity, as well as the desire, to use her liberty in the right ways, to do good for patients and to be faithful to her colleagues and the hospital, not to serve her own interests.

I hope those three definitions will assist in explaining what Paul is talking about in terms of the difference between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ, not only in Romans but in Galatians.

Now, in Romans chapter 7 Paul uses a legal analogy based on the law relating to marriage to explain how and why the Law of Moses has ended:

¹ Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during his life? ² Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Romans 7:1-3 (RSV)

In this illustration of a married woman, Paul shows the law relating to marriage is only applicable while both husband and wife are still alive. However, as soon as one of them dies, the other is released from the law of marriage. So, if the husband dies, then the wife is free to marry again and would not be an adulterer. But she would have been an adulterer if she had done so while the law of marriage still applied to her. You might be asking what that has got to do with the Law of Moses, but Paul goes on to explain it:

⁴ Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵ While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

Romans 7:4-6 (RSV)

So far as the Law is concerned it is as though we had “*died to the law*” and therefore been released from its provisions. That death which releases us from the Law is primarily the death of Jesus on the cross which marked the point at which the Law was fulfilled. However, in another sense, it is also our own ‘death’ which brings about our release from the Law. That is because, if we truly believe in Him, we are so identified with Christ *it is as if we had died with Him*.

As for when that ‘death’ occurred for us as Christians, it was at the moment of our conversion, when we first identified ourselves with Him, by believing in who He is and what He achieved for us on the cross. Paul refers elsewhere, in Galatians 2:20, to his having been “*crucified with Christ*” and, in Romans 6:6, he says of all believers that “*our old self was crucified with him*”.

The event which is intended to signify this death metaphorically is our baptism in water, which has far more significance than most people realise, as I discuss in my Book 1 on *How to become a Christian*. Paul therefore says, in Colossians 2:12, “*and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead*”.

In the early Church baptism in water used to take place almost immediately after conversion. They did not go in for the long delays between these two events which we usually see today. So, to the early Church it was almost as if conversion and baptism were one combined event, usually occurring on the same day.

Before our conversion, while we were still unsaved, we were operating entirely in the flesh, or “*living in the flesh*” as Paul says above at verse five. The problem was that, while we were unbelievers, the interaction of our sinful flesh nature with the Law of Moses produced nothing but death for us because, in our flesh, as sinful human beings, we were utterly incapable of keeping it.

Note, however, the vital words in verse six above in which Paul says: “*But now we are **discharged from the law**, dead to that which held us captive...*”. Yet again, one has to ask how Paul can be any clearer? What else can “*discharged from the law*” mean other than that it no longer applies to us?

Paul then refers in verse six to the fact that we now serve “*not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit*”. The “old written code” to which he is referring is the Law of Moses. So, Paul is saying that we are not under it, but he is not criticising it. He is simply differentiating between the way the Law operated, which told us exactly what to do in the tiniest details, but which none of us were ever capable of obeying, and the way we now operate, as Christians living in “*the new life of the Spirit*”.

Under this we seek day by day with God's help and guidance to obey the Law of Christ, not the Law of Moses, and to follow Him on the narrow path as we grow and mature as disciples.

I have heard people speaking about this who have been deeply confused and thought '*the old written code*' is the Bible. That is not what Paul is referring to, and we are, most certainly, still under a duty to believe and obey the Bible. Unlike the 613 commands of the Law of Moses, the Bible as a whole has not yet been fulfilled and, therefore, has not passed away. So, we *are* under the Bible, but we are *not* under the Law.

I stress that because I have heard people speaking as if this means we do not need to read or obey the Bible. That is a complete misunderstanding of the meaning of the '*old written code*'.

Paul means only the 613 commands of the Law of Moses which are, themselves, only a part of some of the five books of Moses. Therefore, the fact that we are now to live "*in the new life of the Spirit*" does *not* mean we are free to ignore the Bible. On the contrary, it is impossible to live that new life without a constantly growing knowledge of the Bible, in which we learn about God's principles, His character, and the ways He wants us to operate.

So, living the new life of the Spirit means following the Law of Christ which in turn means obeying the Bible and applying all its commands and principles to the situations we face, while also obeying our conscience and the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 7:7-12, Paul makes clear he is not criticising the Law or blaming it for anything. Nevertheless, the fact is that when our sin nature comes into 'collision' with the Law our sinfulness is exposed and even increased:

⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."⁸ But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died;¹⁰ the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me.¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Romans 7:7-12 (RSV)

Paul's point is that the creation of the Law brought with it a far greater scope for us to 'transgress', i.e. to break known laws and commandments, simply because there were suddenly far more rules there to break. This therefore greatly increased the extent of our sinfulness because once there is a system of Law in operation, especially one so detailed and large as the Law of Moses, the opportunity to transgress is hugely multiplied, not only revealing but also increasing our sinfulness.

Even so, our sin is still not the fault of the Law, and Paul never blames it, because it is all entirely our own fault. Yet, the fact remains that being subject to the Law does not create any righteousness in us, but only further opportunities to sin. For example, Paul found the very commandment not to covet (i.e. to wrongfully desire that which rightfully belongs to others) only caused him to covet even more.

Paul's conclusion is that when his sin nature comes up against the Law it only results in him sinning even more and, therefore, in spiritual death for him. Even so, Paul then stresses again that this is not

the fault of the Law but of his own sin nature “*working death*” in him “*in order that sin might be shown to be sin*”, i.e. exposed for what it is:

¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working 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.¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:13-15 (RSV)

Paul then underlines this point further by explaining that although the Law is good, his sin nature causes him to sin even when he does not want to because, like all of us, Paul was ‘carnal’. That means he had a sinful flesh nature inherited from Adam which meant that even when he wanted to do good he would do evil.

The effect in practice of the Law, therefore, was not to restrain or reduce such sin, as you might imagine, but to increase it and expose it so we can all see our sin more clearly and realise there is nothing good in us:

¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

Romans 7:16-20 (RSV)

Paul then goes on to explain that although he had wanted to obey the Law, he was unable to do so, and is still unable to do so, because there is in his ‘members’, i.e. his sinful flesh nature, an irresistible force which compels him to sin. That is the case with the Law of Moses and all other sets of rules we might try to live by because we are incapable of keeping any of them, even if we want to.

Paul then coins an interesting phrase in which he speaks of how with his mind he wants to serve the law of God, but with his flesh, i.e. his sin nature, he serves “*the law of sin*”:

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self,²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Romans 7:21-25 (RSV)

This ‘law of sin’ means that whenever a sinful human being comes up against the Law of Moses, or any other set of rules, there is a disastrous collision which only creates more sin and brings about our spiritual death. It is as if the Law and our sinful flesh nature were two cars which crash into each other. Yet, in every case, it is us, not the Law, that is at fault for that collision.

Happily, having made these grim points about the Law and our flesh nature, Paul then goes on in Romans chapter 8, to speak of how we have been “*set free from the law of sin and death*”, such that there is now, for a genuine Christian, “*no condemnation*”:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1-2 (RSV)

This setting free was achieved by Jesus Christ through His perfect compliance with the Law, ending in His death on the cross, which released us from this bondage. Therefore, the position now is that all the requirements that were previously made of us by the Law have been *fulfilled by Jesus, on our behalf*. Therefore, we don't have to keep it.

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:3-4 (RSV)

Romans chapters 9, 10 and 11 address the position of the Jewish people, as they currently are, but also as they will be in the end when "*all Israel will be saved*". For now, however, the situation of unsaved Jews, who do not believe the Gospel, and who do not therefore accept Jesus as their Messiah, is that they are lost. In this next passage Paul speaks of them "*being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own*".

Just as in Paul's day, there are today many Jews, and increasingly many misguided Christians, who are *trying to earn righteousness for themselves* by observing the Law, or their favourite parts of it, rather than simply believing the Gospel and having all of Jesus' righteousness given to them freely, by God's grace, as a gift:

¹ Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Romans 10:1-3 (RSV)

Romans 10:4 – a vital verse which tells us "Christ is the end of the Law"

We now come to an extremely important verse, Romans 10:4, in which Paul refers to Christ being "*the end of the law*". This verse has, however, also created confusion. The Greek word used by Paul, which has been translated as 'end' in English, is '*telos*'. Just like its English equivalent, it has two meanings, and *both meanings are intended*. Therefore, when Paul refers to Christ being "the end of the law", he means *both* of the following:

- a) Firstly, that Jesus is the *objective, purpose, or ultimate goal*, to which not only the Law of Moses, but the entire Old Testament was pointing. When used in this way, the word *end* has that meaning just as, in English, we might ask someone "*to what end?*", by which we mean "*what are you seeking to achieve?*"
- b) Secondly, that Jesus is the *termination* of the Law of Moses, in the sense that He has *finished it and brought it to an end*. So, the Greek word *telos* also means Jesus has ended the Law, just as you might speak of the end of a book, or TV series, after which it does not continue.

⁴ For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified.
Romans 10:4 (RSV)

So, *telos* or *end* can have either meaning in Greek and the context determines which is meant, just as in English. But in verse 4 above, it has *both* of those meanings. I stress that because many people have tried to argue it only has the first meaning, i.e. that Christ is only the goal, target, or purpose of the Law, but not that He has *brought it to an end*.

However, it plainly does have both meanings and there is no getting away from that fact. Therefore, in yet another way, Paul explicitly states that the Law has ended and that *it was Jesus Himself who ended it*.

The letter of James also supports Paul

Let us look briefly at the letter of James, Jesus' half-brother, i.e. his full 5 chapter letter which comes just after Hebrews in the Bible, not the very short one he wrote in Acts chapter 15. This letter has confused many people who have wrongly taken it to mean that a Christian must do 'good works' to be saved, either keeping the Law of Moses, or parts of it, or observing some equivalent set of rules.

However, that is not what James is saying at all. He is actually teaching salvation by faith alone, every bit as much as Paul. James is just explaining how real faith can be *identified*, and how it can be distinguished from shallow, fake, phoney, insincere, counterfeit faith, which is not actually faith at all. What James is saying is that real faith, though not *consisting* of works, is always *accompanied* by works, just as smoke is not fire, but real fire is always accompanied by smoke.

Thus, we can tell whether a person has real, saving faith or just bogus, pretend faith, by seeing whether there is a *changed life* which results in a changed character and good works of various kinds, and actually *doing something*, rather than merely speaking hollow words:

¹⁴ What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ¹⁸ But some one will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.

James 2:14-19 (RSV)

James then uses the example of Abraham and how he proved the genuineness of his faith in his actions. He obeyed God even when God tested him in the most excruciating way by asking him to sacrifice his (adult) son, Isaac. By the way, Isaac was then aged about 30, and able to give his own full consent to this, not six or seven, as he is wrongly portrayed in so many children's Bibles.

²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?

James 2:20-21 (RSV)

Therefore, Abraham's faith was seen in his works, and validated by his works. Those works proved he had a real faith which was not just theoretical or abstract. Abraham really and truly trusted God's promises to such an extent that he plainly believed God would resurrect Isaac, so as to fulfil what He

had said He would do through him, i.e. making a nation from him and blessing the whole world through him etc.

So, it was Abraham's willingness to obey God without holding anything back, not even his own son, which *proved* he had real faith and it was that real faith which saved him. Likewise, we need real faith, not phoney faith, if we are to be saved:

²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, ²³ and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"; and he was called the friend of God.

James 2:22-23 (RSV)

Verse 24 below in which James says "*a man is justified by works and not by faith alone*" is perhaps what confuses people the most. At first glance it appears to contradict Paul's teaching about salvation being by faith alone, "*not by works, lest any man should boast*". However, one has to realise the context and grasp how James is seeking to give a balanced understanding of what real faith is and how we can identify it because *it always results in action and obedience of some kind, whereas phoney faith doesn't*.

He then gives the example of Rahab the harlot, who saved the lives of the Jewish spies by helping them to escape from their pursuers in Jericho. It was her brave actions which proved she had real faith:

²⁴ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead.

James 2:24-26 (RSV)

Therefore, if we claim to have faith, but do nothing about it, and don't change in any way, or begin to obey God's Word and put it in to practice in our lives, then James would conclude that we are phoney and still unsaved, only pretending to believe, but not actually having faith in any real or meaningful way.

Yet, as James himself showed at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, which he chaired, that *does not involve seeking to obey the Law of Moses*, or trying to get others to do so, for all the reasons which have been set out above, plus those set out below, and also all of those further proofs contained in the letter to the Galatians.

We must not cause others to stumble by the insensitive exercise of our freedom

Now let us move to Romans chapter 14 in which a number of points are made which further prove the Law has ended. In this next passage, Paul is talking about those who argue over what they can eat and even limit themselves to vegetables, avoiding meat or other fancy foods, as Daniel did in Babylon, so as to avoid breaking the food rules within the Law:

¹ As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. ² One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. ³ Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand. ⁵ One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully

convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:1-6 (RSV)

The point is Daniel was right to do as he did because at that time, *the Law of Moses was still in operation*. However, it is not necessary now because the Law has ended. That said, even though we are free from the food laws, Paul is saying we need not argue with “*the man who is weak in faith*”.

Paul means the man who believes the Law is still binding upon him and therefore wrongly thinks he must limit himself to vegetables. It is not our place to judge such a man, or argue with him. Instead, we must respect each other’s personal opinions and take care not to trample on other people’s consciences, especially if they are young or immature believers.

However, the key point is Paul could not possibly write this passage if the Law was still in operation, as it contained many dietary requirements, which were obligatory, and not a matter of personal preference as they now are. If the Law was still in operation, this passage would effectively be saying “*Never mind what Moses said, and don’t worry about breaking the Law of Moses, even though we are still bound by it*”.

Quite obviously, Paul would never say anything absurd like that. It must therefore follow that in saying we can eat whatever we want, and observe Sabbath on any day we choose, or not at all, and that we need not argue with others about what they do, then the Law must have ended. Otherwise Paul would be breaking it himself, and urging others to break it, which he would never do.

Let’s also focus for a moment on verse 5 above which speaks of either esteeming (honouring) one particular day of the week, or treating all days the same, and how Paul is entirely happy with us taking either approach. Plainly, he could not possibly say he was content for us to have Sabbath on *any* day of the week, or even more shocking, *not to have a Sabbath day at all*, if the requirement to observe Sabbath still applied. If it did still apply then Paul’s words would make no sense.

Instead, he would have had to say “*We all need to observe Sabbath and it needs to be on the same day for all of us*. But he didn’t say that, which is impossible to explain if you insist the Law is still in operation and that we must observe the Jewish Sabbath.

Accordingly, there are no longer any dietary requirements, for the simple reason that there is no longer any Law of Moses at all. Nevertheless, we must not pass judgement on each other for what we eat or don’t eat, and for whether we observe the Jewish Sabbath, or Sunday, or some other day, or no day at all.

Paul is concerned that we should take care not to put a ‘*stumbling block*’ in the way of a fellow Christian, whereby we cause him to ‘*fall*’. This can occur if we exercise our freedom thoughtlessly and without sensitivity for the consciences of others who are less well informed than we are. We shall look at that more closely below.

¹³ Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean.

Romans 14:13-14 (RSV)

Note carefully verse 14 above, because that too could only be said if the Law had ended. The point is Paul could not possibly say “*nothing is unclean in itself*” if the Law of Moses still applied, as it clearly states that certain things *are* unclean in themselves and must never be eaten under any circumstances.

Paul then returns to the theme of not offending fellow Christians by the thoughtless or insensitive exercise of our liberty:

¹⁵ If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; ¹⁸ he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for any one to make others fall by what he eats; ²¹ it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. ²³ But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Romans 14:15-23 (RSV)

Paul is saying in verses 15 to 23 that although the Law has ended and we are now free to eat whatever we want, it is possible to offend people and even damage their faith if they have less maturity and understanding than we do.

Paul means that if he was with a person who believed the Law was still in operation, and that certain foods were forbidden, he would not eat those foods in front of that person, because it would offend them. However, Paul would be refraining from eating those foods for purely diplomatic reasons, in order to be sensitive and kind, *not because the Law is still operative*.

When he was with non-Messianic Jews, i.e. Jews who did not believe in Jesus, Paul would observe the Law so as not to offend them, as causing offence might put them off the Gospel. Nevertheless, such diplomacy on Paul’s part was purely voluntary, and was done solely to avoid antagonising them, not because Paul felt himself to be bound by the Law. Here are two more passages which continue that theme:

¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother’s falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall.

1 Corinthians 8:13 (RSV)

¹² “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. ¹³ “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

1 Corinthians 6:12-13 (RSV)

Again, look at verse 12 above and ask yourself whether it would be possible for Paul to say the words “*All things are lawful for me*” if the Law was still in operation. It is clearly inconceivable, because the Law states that a very long list of things *are unlawful*. That being so, if the Law still applied, and Paul was still bound by it, he could not possibly make that statement.

It would be like him saying: “*I am bound by the Law of Moses, but I am free to eat all of the things it forbids me to eat and to do all of the things it forbids me to do*”. There is no way that Paul would make such a nonsensical statement.

Accordingly, the point Paul is again making is that the Law has ended and he is free to eat anything he wants. However, he voluntarily picks and chooses the times at which it would be appropriate to exercise his freedom, so as not to offend or alienate others who *do not know* the Law has ended.

Other letters which further prove the Law of Moses has ended

In this next passage Paul addresses the issue of circumcision:

¹⁸ Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.
1 Corinthians 7:18-19 (RSV)

What Paul is saying in verses 18 to 19 is, yet again, impossible for him to say if the Law is still in operation. He is saying that if you are already circumcised, then continue to be so and do not seek to reverse that. But, if at the point of your conversion to Christianity you are not circumcised, because you are a Gentile convert, then you do not need to be circumcised.

It would be impossible for Paul to say any of that if the Law was still in operation, given that it required circumcision for all male Gentile converts to Judaism. That is why the Judaisers were arguing that this requirement should also apply to all male converts to Christianity.

When, in verse 19 above, Paul speaks of “*keeping the commandments of God*”, he is not talking about the Law of Moses. He means the much wider set of commandments and instructions given *throughout the whole Bible*. Therefore, we are of course bound to obey the Scriptures and do what the prophets and apostles said, and also what Jesus said. The only commandments we are **not** now required to obey are the 613 commands Moses gave which formed what we refer to as the Law of Moses.

As we saw, the rest of the Bible, together with our conscience and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, are what we might now collectively call ‘the Law of Christ’. That is definitely still in operation and we must obey it. Therefore, for example, we *are* obliged to obey Jesus’ words in ‘the Great Commission’ in Matthew 28:19 when He told us to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....*”.

That command is part of the Law of Christ and of course we must obey it. Ironically, many of the people who are strident about the need to obey the Law of Moses ignore lots of other things that Jesus said, such as the Great Commission. They also ignore much of what the prophets and apostles said, not least Bible prophecy, which makes up about 30% of the Bible.

A crucial statement by Paul – “though not being myself under the Law”

We now come to a passage which is a real ‘clincher’ in terms of proving Paul did not consider himself to be under the Law. And if he isn’t under the Law, then how can you or I be under it?

²⁰ *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.* ²³ *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

1 Corinthians 9:20-23 (RSV)

We need to look closely at verse 20 above because, if we read it too quickly, the point may easily be missed. Paul is again speaking of how, when he is with unbelieving Jews, who do not accept Jesus as their Messiah, he carefully observes the Law, as if he was under it, so as not to offend them. He is very anxious not to do anything to put them off the Gospel. However, zoom in and take careful note of the vitally important words: *“though not being myself under the law”*.

If you are looking for a short, explicit, unmistakably clear statement that Paul did not consider himself to be under the Law, then this is surely it. How could he possibly say those words if he thought he *was* under the Law. Moreover, how can we possibly be under the Law when Paul wasn't? It would make no sense at all.

But there is even more in the above passage which proves the Law is over. Note how Paul speaks of how he acts when with Jews as opposed to how he acts when with Gentiles. In both cases what he says is completely inconsistent with the Law still being in operation. That is to say he couldn't make either statement if the Law was still in force.

Paul says that when he is with Jews he *“became as one under the Law”*. That clearly implies that he was only choosing voluntarily to abide by the Law when with them. However, if the Law was still in force he would have no choice in the matter. It would be like saying *“When I drive past the school I choose to keep my speed down to 20mph”*. That plainly means there is not a 20mph speed limit in force. There can't be, because if there was, you would not speak of *“choosing”*.

Then Paul says that when with Gentiles, (i.e. “those outside the Law”) he *“became as one outside the Law”* by which he means he did not observe it. But the Law did not allow anyone to pick and choose whether, when and with whom they would obey it. It was binding at all times and in all places and there was no such thing as deciding *when or whether* to obey it.

Therefore the fact that Paul is speaking in those terms proves, even more conclusively, that he did not consider himself bound to obey the Law. But the point is he could only think that if it had ended. Remember also that this is all being said in 1 Corinthians, which is *Scripture* and which was *inspired by the Holy Spirit*. That means that God approved and endorsed every word Paul wrote. Can you imagine the Holy Spirit allowing Paul to say any of this if the Law had not ended?

If Paul had been wrong the Holy Spirit would not have allowed 1 Corinthians to become part of the Bible. Paul's letter would then have gone into the waste paper basket alongside other uninspired letters that Paul wrote such as letters complaining about his electricity bill. Thus, however you look at it, there is no getting around the fact that it means the Law has ended.

If we don't have to observe food laws, festivals, new moons or even Sabbath, how can the Law still be in operation?

Now, in this next verse from Colossians, Paul makes clear that we are not bound by food laws or by the need to observe festivals, new moons or even Sabbath. But all of these were plainly required by the Law so, again, we have to ask how could Paul possibly say this if the Law was still in operation?

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath.

Colossians 2:16 (RSV)

Paul says, in Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the circumcision party were “deceivers”

In Titus 1:10-11 below, Paul makes clear what he thinks of the Judaizers or circumcision party who were campaigning to impose the Law on everyone. Again, how could he say this about them if they were right and the Law was still in operation? Remember *the Holy Spirit was inspiring Paul* as he wrote these words about the Judaizers and He therefore included Paul's words within the Scriptures.

What else can that mean but that the Holy Spirit is endorsing what Paul says *about their character, not just their teachings?* In other words, the Holy Spirit was not only endorsing Paul's theology but also his assessment of the characters of these men who were opposing him, many of whom were *deceivers*. That point alone enables us to decide whether to believe them or Paul.

¹⁰ For there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party; ¹¹ they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach.

Titus 1:10-11 (RSV)

What the letter to the Hebrews tells us about the ending of the Law of Moses

Let us now turn to look in some detail at the letter to the Hebrews. My personal view is it was written by apostle Paul, for several reasons, not least its style and the phrases used, which are highly reminiscent of Paul's style and vocabulary, but also the fact that it was obviously written by an extremely highly educated man – and Paul is the only such man we know of. Also, it contains many references to what happens in Heaven and Paul was the only man ever to have been to Heaven and returned. So, I see that as another clue as to the authorship.

In addition to that, the letter is aimed at Jewish believers but Paul knew he was very unpopular among Jews because of the lies which had been told about him by his many enemies. Therefore, it would make sense for him to leave his name off the letter so as not to put Jewish people off. But that consideration would only apply to him and not to any other New Testament writer.

But whoever wrote it, the point is it is Scripture and it contains further points on the subject of the Law. In this short passage from chapter seven of Hebrews the writer is speaking about the Levitical priesthood, for which only the physical descendants of Aaron are eligible, and contrasting it with the priesthood which Jesus now has after the order of Melchizedek:

¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

Hebrews 7:11-12 (RSV)

You may recall that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. Therefore, He was not even eligible, under the Law of Moses, to operate as a Levite, let alone to serve as a priest in the Temple. The priests had to be descendants of both Levi and Aaron, which Jesus was not. But this presents a problem, because we know from the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus is now our ‘High Priest’ and that He intercedes on our behalf with God the Father. That is His current ministry and he has been doing it for 2000 years.

The problem is that, under the Law, Jesus was not even entitled to enter the ‘Holy Place’ within the Jerusalem Temple, which only priests could enter. Even less could He enter the ‘Holy of Holies’, the innermost part of the Jerusalem Temple, which only the High Priest could enter and, even then, only on one day of the year, ‘*Yom kippur*’ or ‘*the Day of atonement*’.

How then can Jesus now serve as a priest at all, let alone as our High Priest, if the Law is still in force? For Him to do so, given that He is not a descendant of Aaron and not even a member of the tribe of Levi, would arguably be to break the Law of Moses, even though He told us that He is the Lord of the Temple.

Even if His exalted status as Lord of the Temple enabled Him to get around the provisions of the Law concerning priesthood, my feeling is He would still not be willing to do it, if only for the sake of appearances and “fulfilling all righteousness”. He certainly wasn’t willing to enter the prohibited parts of the Temple during His earthly ministry.

What we do know for sure is that He would never do anything which did break the Law. Therefore, if that provision applied to Him, then Jesus could only operate as our High Priest if the Law had ended. At any rate, that would clearly be so if he had tried to operate as a Levitical priest.

But I would think that even though He operates as a priest after the order of Melchizedek He would still consider Himself precluded from doing that unless the Law had ended, even though priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is not specifically prohibited, or even mentioned, in the Law of Moses.

The answer to the dilemma is mainly to be found in the fact that the Law of Moses has ended. Therefore, Jesus can now operate freely as our High Priest without breaking the Law because there is no longer anything in place to forbid it, or even to make His legitimacy as our High Priest questionable.

The position is made unmistakably clear by verse 12 above which explicitly tells us there was “*a change in the priesthood*”. That means something major had occurred which impacted a key part of the Law of Moses, i.e. the rules pertaining to the priesthood. But for one of those rules about priesthood to be altered, even in the tiniest way, let alone ended, would require the complete ending of the entire Law of Moses.

That is because, as we have seen, the Law is one complete integrated whole and, as Jesus told us, none of it can be ended, or even relaxed, until all has been accomplished and the Law has been fulfilled. In

other words, the rules governing the priesthood cannot be altered at all unless the entire Law of Moses has ended.

Yet we are clearly told that there *has been* a change in the priesthood and that this change made it necessary for there to be a change in the Law. One must therefore deduce from Hebrews 7:12 that Jesus Himself believed that a change in the Law was needed for Him to serve as our High Priest, albeit that it is under an entirely different form of priesthood.

Consequently, there manifestly was a change in the rules relating to the priesthood in order for Jesus to become our High Priest, and to serve after the order of Melchizedek rather than of Aaron. This meant there had to be a change in the Law. Therefore, that change in His primary role, from prophet to priest, is yet another reason why the Law had to end.

However, it wasn't enough only for the Law of Moses to end in order for Jesus to begin to function as our High Priest in Heaven. It was also necessary for the '*New Covenant*' to come into being. The commencement of the New Covenant was another prerequisite to make it possible for Jesus' role as High Priest to begin. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the New Covenant, and he quotes from the book of Jeremiah, the prophet who told us of it in the first place:

⁸ *For he finds fault with them when he says:*

*“The days will come, says the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah;*

⁹ *not like the covenant that I made with their fathers
on the day when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of the land of Egypt;
for they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I paid no heed to them, says the Lord.*

¹⁰ *This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.*

¹¹ *And they shall not teach every one his fellow
or every one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
for all shall know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.*

¹² *For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.”*

¹³ *In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.*

Hebrews 8:8-13 (RSV)

The point is that yet another reason why it was necessary for the Law of Moses to end was in order to be able to replace it with the New Covenant. As we see from verse 13 above, the arrival of the New Covenant meant that God treated the first covenant, i.e. the one made with Moses, as *obsolete*. How can anyone explain the use of that word if the Law was still in operation?

The arrival of the New Covenant made the Law of Moses (the Mosaic Covenant) unnecessary. In fact, it even became an obstacle to what God wanted to do after Jesus' earthly ministry had ended and His heavenly ministry as our High Priest began. His death therefore made it necessary firstly to end the Law of Moses and then to replace it with the New Covenant so that He could enter into His new role.

In Hebrews chapter 9 the writer goes into further detail about the nature of the Mosaic Covenant and what it had to say about the worship and sacrifices that took place in the (replica) Temple in Jerusalem. Remember, when he speaks of '*the first covenant*', he means the Mosaic Covenant, or Law of Moses.

That is not because it was the first covenant God ever made. The very first one was made with Adam. By 'first' covenant the writer simply means *earlier* covenant, in the sense that the Mosaic Covenant came before the New Covenant:

¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. ² For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, ⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; ⁵ above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. ⁶ These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; ⁷ but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people.

Hebrews 9:1-7 (RSV)

The problem was that although the Law was perfect for what it was designed to do, which was, primarily, to prove we were sinners, there were certain things it could not do. In particular, the animal sacrifices offered continually in the Temple in Jerusalem could not "*perfect the conscience of the worshipper*". That is to say the animal sacrifices could not take away our sin.

Moreover, we are explicitly told in verse 10 below that the procedures and arrangements within the Jerusalem Temple, under the Law of Moses, were only imposed "*until the time of reformation*". That time arrived when Jesus died on the cross and brought the New Covenant into being:

⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing ⁹ (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

Hebrews 9:8-10 (RSV)

In this next passage, verses 11 to 14, there is an important detail about what Jesus did as our High Priest *after His death*. He went to Heaven to offer His blood as a perfect, once for all, sacrifice in the original Holy Place in the heavenly tent or Tabernacle, of which the Temple in Jerusalem was just a replica.

Remember that Jesus had never entered that replica Holy Place in Jerusalem because the Law forbade Him to do so. He only ever went into the outer court where any Jew was entitled to go.

I believe this offering of His own blood in Heaven took place on the morning of His resurrection, after He encountered Mary Magdalene in John 20:16-18. Indeed, I believe that was why He told her in verse 17 not to touch Him, as He did not want to be ritually defiled by contact with her prior to entering the Holy Place in Heaven. (That was not because there was anything wrong with Mary. A High Priest was not permitted to touch *any* woman before doing his duty in the Temple.)

Accordingly, the Jewish High Priest had to take great care to avoid being defiled before He went into the Temple in Jerusalem and so I believe that what Jesus said to Mary Magdalene reflected that. Of course, later, after He had offered His own blood in the heavenly Tabernacle, Jesus no longer objected to being touched.

He had no reason to object, firstly because the Law had ended, but also because He would never again need to enter the Holy Place in Heaven to offer His blood for us. We need to take careful note of this incident outlined in Hebrews about Jesus offering His blood in Heaven because surprisingly few people know about it and it is very rarely preached on.

At any rate, we know that Jesus did enter the *real and original Holy Place, which is in Heaven*, and the blood He presented there as a sacrifice on our behalf was not merely that of animals, but *His own blood*. Moreover, it was not done repeatedly, as the animal sacrifices were in the Temple, but “*once for all*”:

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Hebrews 9:11-14 (RSV)

By shedding His blood on the cross on our behalf to take the punishment due to us, and then completing the transaction by presenting His own blood within the original Tabernacle in Heaven, Jesus became “*the mediator of a New Covenant*”, i.e. the covenant spoken of by Jeremiah. To enable Him to do this Jesus had, firstly, to bring the New Covenant into operation.

His death also redeemed us, i.e. bought us back, or set us free, from the consequences of our transgressions under the ‘first’ covenant, i.e. the Mosaic Covenant, or Law of Moses. Had He not done this we would have continued to be liable for failing to obey the Law of Moses:

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

Hebrews 9:15 (RSV)

In verses 16-17 below the writer of the letter to the Hebrews likens the New Covenant to a ‘will’ which a person would go to their lawyer to make. That will then sits in a drawer or filing cabinet, but is ‘not in force’. It does not take effect, *until the person dies*.

Likewise, the New Covenant was revealed to us by God in the book of Jeremiah but *it did not actually take effect until Jesus died*. In other words, the New Covenant was Jesus' will, which could only begin to operate after His death:

¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷ For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.

Hebrews 9:16-17 (RSV)

¹⁸ Hence even the first covenant was not ratified without blood. ¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you."

²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 9:18-22 (RSV)

The writer to the Hebrews then speaks of the Law of Moses as being "*but a shadow of the good things to come*", and by 'good things' he meant the New Covenant. This involved the only form of sacrifice, or shedding of blood that was actually capable of saving us, i.e. Jesus offering *His own blood in the real and original 'tent' or 'Tabernacle' in Heaven*.

That is because the repeated animal sacrifices made in the replica Holy Place in the Temple in Jerusalem could not do so. The blood of those animals could only "cover" the sins of the people temporarily while the world waited for the real sacrifice of the Messiah Himself. The animal sacrifices in the replica Temple in Jerusalem were a type or illustration of what Jesus would one day do:

¹ For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.

Hebrews 10:1 (RSV)

Moreover, in the verse below, Hebrews 10:9, the writer spells out that the Mosaic Covenant, or Law of Moses had to end first in order for the New Covenant to begin to operate. It is as with a living man and that man's 'estate' which can only begin at his death. At that point, the provisions of his will first begin to apply, having had no effect at all until then.

The two arrangements are *mutually exclusive*, i.e. they cannot exist at the same time. One cannot have an 'estate' with executors taking active steps to administer the estate, while one is still alive. It would be a legal absurdity. If you are alive you can not have an 'estate'. But if you are dead you can.

In like manner, at the point of Jesus' death the Law of Moses had to end in order that the New Covenant, or Jesus' 'will', if we use that metaphor, could begin to operate. That was because the two covenants, the Law of Moses (Mosaic Covenant) and the New Covenant, *could not function at the same time*, just as a living man cannot have an estate, with functioning executors, while he is still alive.

I hope I have made that clear but, if not, you might wish to listen to the audio version this, which may help to clarify these possibly confusing and obscure legal points. Sometimes the spoken word can be clearer than the written word.

⁹ then he added, “Lo, I have come to do thy will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

Hebrews 10:9 (RSV)

Again, for the avoidance of doubt, in this next verse the writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus being “*the mediator of a new covenant*”. He also alludes to the blood of Jesus which is what brought that New Covenant into operation:

²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:24 (RSV)

Can we identify the exact moment when the Law of Moses ended?

I would like to briefly address the question of *exactly when* the Law of Moses ended. I cannot point to any explicit statement in Scripture answering that question precisely because there isn't one. Therefore, I shall have to rely on logical deduction from the limited facts we are given. As always, it is then your duty to assess for yourself whether my deductions are valid or not.

The Bible generally refers to the Law ending when Jesus died and we could therefore just leave it at that and it would be perfectly acceptable. However, I personally believe that even after His death, on the morning of His resurrection, Jesus acted in a manner that suggested He still felt obliged to obey what the Law said about a High Priest not allowing himself to be ‘*defiled*’ before entering the Temple. I refer to Jesus’ reaction in John 20:17 when Mary Magdalene wanted to touch Him and He told her not to:

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rab-bo'ni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” ¹⁸ Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20:16-18 (RSV)

I hasten to add that the Bible does not tell us *why* He said this to her. Therefore, I am relying solely on my own deductive reasoning. However, let me set out what I think happened and leave it to you to decide whether you agree. If you disagree then I suggest you use the shorthand expression that the Law ended at His death without attempting to narrow it down any more precisely than that.

It is sometimes necessary and legitimate to be a little imprecise about the exact timing of an event or a change of status. We do that ourselves in our own daily lives and occasionally the Bible does so too. An example of such imprecision from our own ordinary life might be this. If I was asked exactly when I completed my university degree, I could say it was:

a) the day I finished my last exam paper, or

- b) the day I got my degree results, or
- c) the day I put on a gown and went to see Princess Margaret to receive my degree formally.

I could legitimately point to any one of those three dates as being the day when I ceased to be a student and I expect you would agree they are all reasonable statements. In like manner, there is difficulty in pinning down exactly when the Law of Moses ended and the New Covenant began because it gets a bit blurred at the edges. Having said that, I shall seek to set out the sequence of events as I understand them and try to identify what was happening at each point in time.

During the short time when He lay in the tomb from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning we are told nothing of the status of the Law or of the precise timing of the transition to the New Covenant. The next incident we encounter is Jesus' meeting with Mary Magdalene early on the Sunday morning and what He said to her presents a difficulty.

I cannot think of any reason why He would object to her touching Him until after He had "*ascended*" other than to avoid being ritually defiled. Moreover, He cannot have been referring to His final visible ascension from the Mount of Olives 40 days later because, during the time He spent on Earth after He rose, He never again prevented anyone from touching Him.

Therefore, this earlier ascension on the Sunday morning when He rose was not the same as the final one that took place from the Mount of Olives and it has to be explained separately. So, if I am correct, then here is a summary drawing together the whole sequence of events on that Sunday morning when Jesus was resurrected:

- 1) On meeting Mary Magdalene it would seem He still considered Himself restrained by the Law of Moses in that He could not allow her to touch Him.
- 2) Note that earlier, during His earthly ministry, Jesus felt no reluctance about anybody touching Him, and he was even criticised for His willingness to mingle with people whom the Scribes and Pharisees would not mix with. Therefore, something had changed on that morning, and I believe it was that Jesus was *preparing to enter into His new ministry* as High Priest. It was that new role, not His status as Messiah or Son of God, that had to be protected from ritual defilement. Defilement of this type only had relevance to priests, because other Jews were not required to enter the Temple to offer sacrifices.
- 3) Therefore, a transition of some kind had either already begun, or was about to occur, which required Jesus, for the first time, to avoid this type of ritual defilement. But the need to avoid that could only be based on the Law of Moses, since there was no other law to prohibit it. Therefore, I have to conclude that when He met Mary, the Law was still operational, at least for another hour or two.
- 4) However, at some point later that day, we know Jesus did actually enter the Holy Place in the original Tabernacle in Heaven. So the Law of Moses must already have ended when He did that.
- 5) We know this because two things were needed *before* Jesus could function as our High Priest and enter the Tabernacle in Heaven:
 - a) There had to be "*a change in the priesthood*" as per Hebrews 7:12 to enable Him to become a priest, given that He wasn't a Levite or descended from Aaron. But any change in the Law,

however small, required the ending of the entire Law, because it is one complete package and no part could be altered without breaking the whole Law.

- b) The New Covenant had to have *already come into operation before* He offered His blood.
- 6) I deduce from all of this that the Law of Moses must have ended at some point between Jesus leaving Mary Magdalene and arriving at the Tabernacle in Heaven. I believe the New Covenant then came into being immediately after the Law had ended. We know that Jesus did actually enter the Holy Place to offer His blood and He wouldn't have done so unless all the legal requirements needed to authorise Him to do this *had already occurred*.
- 7) Therefore, at some point during that Resurrection Sunday the Law ended and the New Covenant then began.

I hope that piece of logical deduction helps you. Intricate details like this are important to me and I find I can't rest until I have worked things out fully. However, if you aren't convinced by my reasoning, I see no harm at all in just using the shorthand expression that the Law ended *when Jesus died*, without delving any deeper into the precise details of the timing.

What about the new Temple that will be built in the Millennium, which Ezekiel speaks of? Will the sacrifices made in that be done under the Law of Moses?

This is another little known area which few people ever preach on. But I want to refer to it here briefly, for completeness, and because it further strengthens the case for saying the Law has ended. I can't quote it here, as you would need to read the last nine chapters of Ezekiel i.e. chapters 40-48 inclusive.

In those chapters Ezekiel sets out in meticulous detail the exact measurements and layout of the fourth Temple, i.e. the one which will only be built when Jesus has returned and the Millennium is under way. It is not referring to the third Temple which will be built at some point before or during the Tribulation and which the antichrist will enter and desecrate.

The point is if you read Ezekiel you will see that animal sacrifices will be resumed during the Millennium, as a commemoration of what Jesus did on the cross, and they will be sacrificed in the Temple by the Levitical priests. On hearing that, an advocate of the Law might argue that this surely proves the Law is still in operation and will still be in force even in the Millennium, let alone now. But that is not correct.

In fact, it proves the opposite because the arrangement described in Ezekiel is not identical to the Law of Moses. It does sound similar, but it is *not the same* and, as we have seen, no change at all can be made to the Law without ending it completely because it is one complete, integrated package which can't be added to, taken from or altered. But the fact is that what is described in Ezekiel is different and that definite changes are made.

For example, we see at Ezekiel 43:19 that the priests at that time will also have to be descendants of Zadok rather than just descendants of Aaron as was the case under the Law of Moses. As we saw above, that one change alone would require the ending of the entire Law, even if it hadn't already ended.

So, if we imagine for a moment that the Law hadn't ended when Jesus died, it would mean the Law of Moses would have to end in the Millennium, at the very latest, (given the new rule about Zadok's

descendants) even if you reject all the other proofs that it has already ended. But remember, the entire Millennium takes place *before Heaven and Earth pass away*.

We know from Revelation that after the Millennium has been completed, the Earth's surface will then be burned up and renewed in a perfect condition so the New Jerusalem and Heaven itself can descend onto the Earth and God the Father will then come to live here on the Earth for eternity.

That means the people who cling to Matthew 5:17 and say the Law won't end until Heaven and Earth pass away must be mistaken. Plainly it will end before they pass away, even if the ending of the Law was to be delayed until the 4th Temple is built during the Millennium. The point is this is yet another proof that their interpretation of Matthew 5:17 is mistaken and that they have misunderstood what Jesus was saying. And if that is so, then their entire case collapses.

Conclusion

Hopefully, if you didn't already know it, you have been persuaded by now that the Law of Moses has ended. The series of proofs the Bible gives are so numerous, so consistent and so overwhelming that one has no alternative but to accept that the Law ended when Jesus died. Admittedly, some of the proofs may not satisfy you singly, if they were each the only proof. But if they are all taken together, as a whole case, I believe they are unanswerable.

At any rate, I am not able to refute them, and I believe I would be able to have a go at refuting them if any kind of case existed, even a weak one. When I was in practice as a lawyer, I often adopted my opponent's argument, just for a moment, to see how strong I could make their case if I was on their side. So, I am well used to doing that when acting against someone. But here, over this issue, I am unable to present any honest, coherent, reasonable argument for the Law still being in operation. The case the Bible presents is just too clear and too strong.

It is like bringing in two dozen witnesses to a court room all of whom give consistent, credible and compelling evidence. When weighed against the case for the Law still being in operation, which is basically just the first line of Matthew 5:17, the imbalance in the evidence is stark. Either the advocates of the Law have misunderstood what Jesus said about not coming to abolish/destroy/throw down the Law, or I have misunderstood **all** of this long list of proofs, from all over the New Testament and even the Old Testament.

What are the chances of there being such an overwhelming imbalance of evidence, quite apart from the fact that the inherent logic for the ending of the Law is itself so compelling? Such a preponderance of evidence could only arise if the case for the ending of the Law is true.

Therefore, if you have been an advocate of the Law up to now, my advice is to surrender gracefully and admit you were wrong, or were wrongly taught. If you do admit that you will be in good company because I myself have been wrong about dozens of things over the last 43 years.

That happened to me on lots of issues and topics until the Holy Spirit opened my eyes on each occasion and got me to see my error or my blindspot. There is no shame in that. On the contrary, it is entirely right and proper. You can't learn without finding areas where you are currently mistaken and then discarding those wrong beliefs.

And if your views are shown to be wrong, then it is your duty to discard them willingly and adopt the correct position. At any rate, whether we like to admit it or not, making errors about our theology is

inevitable and carries no stigma because we are all fallible people, including you and me. The only shame is in being too proud or stubborn to admit one's errors, not in making them.

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