

Interpreting Paul and Other NT Epistles

Opening Question: Consider Paul's strong words about the Law.

- "...by works of the law no one will be justified." Galatians 2:16
- "For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" Romans 3:20
- "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." Romans 4:15
- "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse" Galatians 3:10
- "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" Philippians 3:9

Based on these verses, what could you conclude was Paul's view of the law? What could be some implications for believing that Paul believed that the law was a bad thing?

I. Importance of Paul

- A. Author of 13 books of the 27 books of the New Testament
- B. Key source for major theological terms justification, sanctification, faith, and church.
- C. In the genre of epistolary literature, he composed 13 of 20 NT epistles

II. From Problem to Solution or From Solution to Problem?

- A. For those who became Christian later in life, did you first realize you had a problem in life and then realize Jesus was the answer, or did you find Jesus attractive and then realize your problem?
- B. Did Paul go from knowing Israel and humanity had a problem and then understanding Jesus as the solution or did Paul discover Jesus was the solution to a problem he didn't know?
 1. Traditional View: Solution to Problem
 - a. Self-righteous Pharisee-Traditionally, scholars have said Paul was a self-righteous Pharisee who didn't realize that salvation was by faith and not by works. His conversion revealed the underlying problem.
 - b. How would this change your reading of Paul? What would it mean for how you read passages about the Law? What is the center of Paul's message?
 - 2.. Covenant zealot-Others have said Paul was acutely aware of Israel's sin and he hoped God would provide the solution.
 - a. How would this change your reading of Paul?
 3. The answer is somewhere in-between.

What was the problem? Did Israel need a savior?

 - a. Signs of trouble: Exile, no-king, corrupt Temple
 - b. God's solution, though, was very different and it ultimately changed Paul's understanding of the problem.

III. Context for Paul's Theology: The covenant, Saul's (pre-conversion Paul's) hope, and Jesus

A. OT Future Hope: What was the future hope of people before Christ? What did they believe Israel had to do in order to make that future come about?

1. Related to Gentile/Nations: They would submit to Israel's King (Is. 60; Zech. 8:23)
2. Related to the wicked and righteous: Day of Judgment (Joel 3:1-3)
3. Related to the restoration of the Land, King, and Temple: God would return to Jerusalem and bring back the victorious king (Zech. 8, 9)

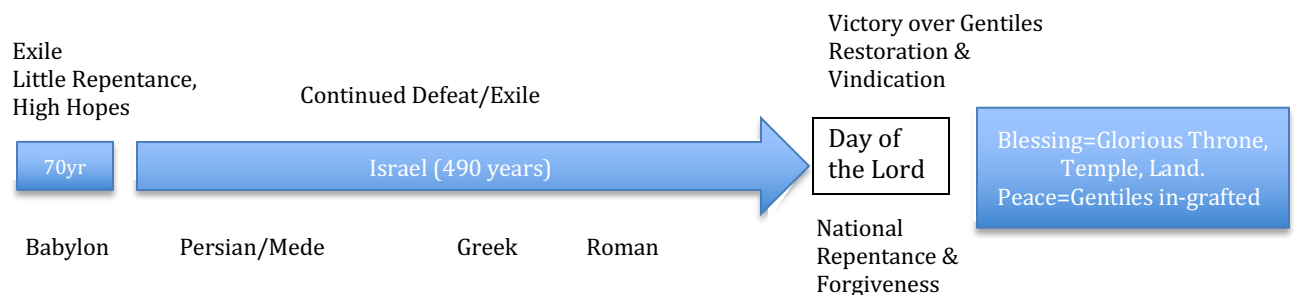
B. What does Israel need to do to bring about this hope? Israel would need to be refined and made pure (Mal 3-4)

Heroes in Israel were those who were zealous for God's Law and getting Israel to return to obedience. **Numbers 25**

1. [1] While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. [2] These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. [3] So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.
2. The Lord was ready to bring judgment on all of Israel when an Israelite and Midianite marry, but Phinehas went to them and pierced them both with a spear.
3. [10] And the LORD said to Moses, [11] "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. [12] Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, [13] and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.'"

C. Summary

- Israel hoped in a day that would come when the people would repent of their sins, return to the Law of Moses.
- Then God would raise up the king who would return and lead a victory of the Gentiles. He would judge the wicked and reward the righteous. Some Gentiles would join themselves to God's people.
- God's people would then return to the land and the temple would be reestablished.



1. What would be a sign that God was finally bringing about this hope?

Ezekiel 37:7-14

[7] So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. [8] And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. [9] Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." [10] So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

[11] Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' [12] Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. [13] And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. [14] And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

2. What would be a sign of failure or continuing under punishment?

- a. Israel continuing to sin and abandoning the Law of Moses
- b. God would still use the nations to punish Israel, continued exile
- c. A sign of a false messiah would be defeat and death

IV. Who was Paul?

A. Paul (so Saul) saw himself as a passionate defender of God and one whose hope depended on the purity of Israel.

B. Zealous Pharisee

1. Self-identification

Philippians 3:4-6

[4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

2. What problem would he have had with Christians?

Christians at the time were mostly Jews who began to worship Jesus and believe in him by faith alone.

C. Saul/Paul and the Christians

1. Acts 9

[1] But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest [2] and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. [3] Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

2. Who did Paul seek to kill/arrest? Why?

Acts 9 (cont.)

³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

D. Conversion: What did Paul see on the Road to Damascus?

1. What difference did seeing the resurrected Jesus make?
2. What were the implications for his hope (eschatology)?

E. Christ and the changing of the Ages

1. If Christ is raised from the dead, then God's promises have been fulfilled. You no longer have to look forward to their coming.
2. If Christ is raised from the dead, the other aspects of God's eschatological blessing would start to become true, too.
 - Forgiveness of sin
 - Gentiles included
 - Redemptive-history concluded? We are now in the end-times.

Application:

1. What kind of implications does the resurrection of Christ have for us today?
2. What is left for Christians to look forward to? What role do we play in bringing it about?
3. Now that we know God's solution, what was the real problem?

V. The Law and Justification

A. What does Paul mean by "law"? For Paul it meant the Torah, the Law of Moses. Obeying the Law before Christ came meant that someone was being faithful to the covenant. They were still, as they had always been, saved by the promise, though.

1. A major issue in the early church was the question of the Law of Moses.
 - a. Were Christians still obliged to obey the law of Moses and keep the covenant?
 - b. Were they free from the law and a new people?
2. Paul wants to argue that they are organically connected to the OT people, they are the new Israel (Rom11), but they are in a different place in redemptive-history. This changes their identity, mission, and understanding of their future hope.

B. Is the Law bad?

1. NT scholars have often made Paul sound antinomian (against the law). They read his argument about salvation by faith not works, and heighten the tension between Law and Gospel. How did Paul view the Law?
2. Galatians 3:21ff

“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”

3. Romans 7:7f; 8:3

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin...sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and righteous and good.”

...For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

4. The Law is good, but for anyone “in Adam” it will produce condemnation and death.

C. Christ and the New Age: Justification by Faith Alone

1. Israel could not bear the law (though someone still needed to!) Israel had the same problem as the world, it was “in Adam”.

2. Christ was the true and faithful Israel (and the last Adam, Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15). He lived the full life of righteous obedience to the Law.

3. His death paid the penalty of sin for his people.

4. For those “in Christ” you are now in the “end times.” For those not “in Christ”, you are “in Adam” you still in the “old age”.

5. You are justified by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This is received by faith alone.

New Testament Eschatology



D. What if you continued to observe the Law?

1. You would be denying Christ’s fulfillment of the Law

2. You would be continuing to live in the old age.

3. The Law would bring your sin to light and condemn you.

E. The Law in Romans and Galatians

1. Galatians: Jewish followers of Jesus were infiltrating the Galatian church and telling the Gentiles that they would need to be circumcised (i.e. keep Torah) to be saved. Paul argues that this misunderstands the significance of Christ. We are now saved by faith in Christ's work.
2. Romans: (The opposite problem) The Jews were kicked out of Rome by Emperor Claudius for a time. Gentiles gained prominence in the church of Rome. When Jews returned they were not welcome back. Paul argues that Christianity DOES INDEED have its organic root in Judaism and gentiles are grafted-in.

VI. Centrality of belief

A. Indicative and Imperative:

1. Is Paul inconsistent? Are we to rest in "grace" or "work out our salvation"? Paul can tell us to "be holy" (imperative) and that we "are holy" (indicative).

"the new life in its moral manifestation is at one time proclaimed and posited as the fruit of the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit—the indicative; elsewhere, however, it is put with no less force as a categorical demand—the imperative. And the one as well as the other occurs with such force and consistency that some have indeed spoken of a 'dialectical paradox' and of an 'antinomy.'" –Herman Ridderbos

2. *The imperative is ALWAYS linked to an indicative, and the indicative ALWAYS precedes the imperative.*

Philippians 2:12-13

Colossians 1:29; 3:3ff.

Ephesians 3:20

Romans 6

3. The two are fundamentally linked. The indicative is conditional on the imperative BUT this does not change the order!

"Colossians 3:1 'If you then were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above.' 'If' in the first clause is certainly not merely hypothetical. It is a supposition from which the imperative goes out as an accepted fact. But at the same time it emphasizes that if what is demanded in the imperative does not take place, that which is supposed in the first clause would no longer be admissible (cf. e.g., Rom. 8:9; Col. 2:20; Gal. 5:25)." -Ridderbos

4. When we apply this, it becomes incredibly great news!

- a. The new life in you is really there, and not just a sign of life. It is not dormant but a militant life battling sin.
- b. Each of us experiences the "now" and "not yet" of sanctification.

B. Flesh and Spirit

1. Does he hate the body?
Galatians 5:16-25
Romans 8:1-11

2. For Paul, “flesh” is identified with sinful humanity, living in the old age, and “in Adam.”

3. Spirit is identification of those empowered by the Holy Spirit. They are of the new age and are “in Christ.”

C. Missionary Paul (Three Missionary Journeys)

What is the Paul’s motivation for missions?

Romans 15:14-21

VII. How to read Epistles

A. Someone else’s mail?

1. Epistles are letters, not narratives, not poetry, not a series of wisdom sayings or commands. Can we read other people’s mail? What problems does this pose?

2. Original message, original audience: we must try to piece together as much information as possible, but we have all we need.

a. We share a great deal with the original audience, including our place in redemptive-history.

b. We may agree or differ with their particular situation, our interpretive task is to compare and contrast our situations, but never to undermine Paul’s theological point.

3. God’s Word to Us is the same as His Word to them.

a. Most of his epistles are directed at the community of faith

b. Epistles were understood to be read by all

Colossians 4:16

¹⁶And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.

Ephesians

Entire letter is probably written for circulation

2 Peter 3:15-16

Peter commends reading Paul’s letters

B. Following the Argument

1. If the author is writing a letter, why do we treat it like a series of aphorisms or commands?

2. Read the whole letter through in one sitting. This is how you’d read any other letter. Most NT epistles are, almost exclusively, one long argument.

3. Think in paragraphs rather than clauses/verses. This will help you avoid proof-texting.

4. Pay attention to transitional clues “for,” “therefore,” “now,” (see indicative and imperative). They help unpack the logical argument.