

Chapter 8

The New Testament Concept of Law

As I was putting the finishing touches on this book, I made a short trip to the Netherlands for a major conference of church workers. After I arrived in Amsterdam and was driven to the conference site some two hours away I sat down to eat supper. Another speaker I had met before came over and said, “What do you think of the news that is happening in America?”

“What news?” I said.

“You know,” he said, “the four passenger planes that crashed.”

“Four planes crashed?” I couldn’t believe my ears. When had four passenger planes ever crashed on the same day and in the same country?

“Yes,” he said, “Two of them crashed into the World Trade Center in New York and another crashed into the Pentagon in Washington. The World Trade Center collapsed.”

I didn’t know whether to believe him or not. This was sounding like science fiction or some movie plot. I said, “This doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“It’s true,” he said, “Go upstairs when you’re done, they have CNN on a big screen.”

I hurriedly finished supper and dashed upstairs to find a room with more than 200 chairs and a giant screen with live feed from CNN in the United States. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a view of the World Trade Center from midtown Manhattan, with the tower to the right smoking from the top floors. As I watched an airplane appeared out of the right side of the screen and slammed into the tower on the left, with a ball of fire spewing out the opposite side. Shortly after that I saw the video of the two towers crashing down upon themselves, carrying any and all occupants to a certain death.

I couldn't get those images out of my mind. I was born and raised in New York City. The Twin Towers were so much a part of the city that my mind and my heart kept telling me this was only TV, this was like the movies, this wasn't really happening. But a few days later, on my return to the United States, we passed New York City at about 30,000 feet and the smoke was still rising from the southern tip of Manhattan Island. It had happened.

In addition to a massive rescue mission, authorities immediately put hundreds, probably thousands, of investigators to work. They were seeking answers to a number of questions. Who masterminded the attacks? How did the hijackers get past airport security and seize control of the planes? How was U.S. intelligence caught so completely off guard? What could be done to prevent similar attacks in the future?

Investigators sifted through the rubble at both sites, looking for clues of who might have done these awful things. They searched for the two kinds of "black boxes" that would provide information regarding the final moments on the doomed airplanes. These voice recorders could indicate if there was some struggle for control of the cockpit. Data recorders

would indicate changes in altitude and speed, and how and when various pedals and steering mechanisms were used. Investigators also went over passenger manifests to find out who might have hijacked each of the planes and how they might have gotten weapons onto the plane. They interviewed ground personnel who checked in the passengers, performed the security checks, and handled the baggage. They monitored recordings of every phone call that went to and from the hijacked planes.

After tracing the likely suspects, investigators ransacked the apartments and the hotel rooms where they had stayed the night before, looking for clues. They examined the rental cars that had brought the hijackers to the various airports. They interviewed friends, relatives, and neighbors, trying to learn who might have supported them in their preparations, and who might be capable of committing a similar act in the future. They checked phone and travel records of each hijacker.

The goals of this massive investigation were to find out who had done these dastardly deeds, how they had done them, and who had supported them in carrying out the operations. In a society grounded in law, execution is always preceded by careful investigation. It is considered just as evil to imprison the innocent as to let the guilty go free. Eventually it was determined that the Al Qaeda organization of Osama bin Laden, supported by the Taliban government of fghanistan, was responsible for the attacks.

The conspirators and their supporters who remained alive after the attacks then became the object of an international campaign to “execute” justice. Bases and supplies were secured in many nations. Commandos and crack military and police units were brought into

the region. Ships, aircraft, helicopters and ground vehicles moved against the Taliban and the terrorists. Assets of all known terrorists were frozen. “Dead or alive!” and “Never again!” became headlines in newspapers around the world.

The Old Testament concepts of investigative and executive judgment, therefore, are alive and well in today’s world. As in other areas, God condescends to behave in ways that are predictable and dependable within the human context. In these areas the language of the New Testament is consistent with the Old. The definitions of legal words in the Old Testament tend to be their definitions in the New as well. Our understanding of the Old Testament is the foundation for an understanding of the New. We will go on to see how these matters of covenant, righteousness and judgment affect our lives even today.

Some readers may have come this far and wondered what difference all this is going to make. And the question is fair. We are used to quick answers to the problems of life. And in a technological age, many of life’s problems can be quickly resolved by the application of some new technology. But in the matters of mind and spirit, quick answers often do more harm than good. They lead us down unproductive sidetracks.

The goal of this book is not spiritual aspirin that feels good for a few hours but doesn’t make a difference in our lives long term. The goal of this book is to provide a foundation for secure living that can stand the test of time. The only way to permanent change is to be grounded on an unshakeable foundation. That’s the key. It must be deep, solid, rightly put together. It requires the accumulation of a certain body of knowledge. We are almost there. We are heading for a conclusion that has the power to change the world. We are about to

discover why so many people have found the faith of the Bible worth dying for.

1) Covenant in the New Testament

The New Testament takes up the Old Testament language of covenant. Let's take a look at a few texts beginning with Matt 26:28. Just before His crucifixion, Jesus eats one last meal with His disciples, the "Last Supper." He takes a cup of grape juice and makes a pronouncement over it. *"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* The blood of "the" covenant.

"The" is a very small and common word, but it sometimes carries huge implications. In this case, it implies that the person reading or hearing it already has a context. If He had said, "This is the blood of "a" covenant," the disciples might have said, "OK, what kind of covenant are you going to tell us about?" But when He talks about "the" covenant, He is saying it is a covenant you are already familiar with, it is a covenant that you already understand.

In this case Jesus was saying even more. He was saying that the cup represented the blood of the one and only covenant, this is the blood of THE covenant. Now what covenant could this possibly be? The supper Jesus was eating with His disciples was not just any supper, it was a Passover meal. It was a celebration of the fundamental event of the Old Testament, the Exodus.

So Jesus celebrates the Passover with His disciples, reviewing the events of the Exodus, and then He says, "This is the blood of THE covenant." What blood is He talking about? The blood of the lamb over the door posts in the Exodus. And what did that blood do? It saved

them from death, saved them from slavery. It was the difference between their whole existence before and everything that came after. It was the decisive turning point. So at the Last Supper Jesus was announcing a new mighty act of God, a New Exodus.

And THE covenant of the Exodus was the covenant with Abraham, the one going all the way back to Eden. So Jesus' death on the cross would not create a covenant different than the one that was there before. The New Testament uses the language of new covenant, but it is not a different covenant. The new covenant is based on the same covenant as the Old Testament. There is no fundamental break between the two. The New Testament picture of Jesus builds directly on the Old Testament concept of covenant.

Romans 10:8: *"But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming."* What is Paul quoting here? It is Deuteronomy, but not just any part of Deuteronomy, it is Deuteronomy, chapter 30. It's the part about the blessings and the curses. Paul here quotes from THE covenant, not from some new and different covenant. And he claims that the gospel he is preaching is one and the same with the covenant given to Moses in Old Testament times.

Now in the book of Romans Paul is arguing with Jewish opponents who are rejecting the gospel as Paul understands it. People often think that Paul's gospel created a distance between himself and Judaism. In fact just four verses before this Paul said that Christ is the end of the law. But whatever he meant by "end" in verse 4 (the two main possibilities are goal and termination) he is not abolishing the old covenant. He is not offering a different covenant. When Christ becomes the end of the law, He is obeying the covenant in doing so. Paul claims

that his preaching is in harmony with the Old Testament covenant.

So what was God doing when he sent Jesus, according to Paul? He was being faithful to the covenant as He had been all along. THE covenant, not some new covenant. Luke 1:67-72: *“His father Zachariah was filled with Holy Spirit and prophesied: ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.’”*

Zachariah has just been informed that his child and that of another are the basis of a new and mighty act of God. And just as in the previous mighty acts, God is remembering His covenant. In Hebrew thinking, remembering has more to do with acting on what you already know than simply recalling something you’ve forgotten. When God remembers His covenant, it is as if He said to Himself, “I am going to obey this covenant like I’ve never obeyed it before.” And what does He do? He sends Jesus. To be born in Bethlehem. To live a perfect life for thirty-three years. To die on the cross and be raised from the dead. In sending Jesus God is remembering His holy covenant.

Which covenant? Zechariah continues in Luke 1:73-75: *“...the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* Zachariah is saying that in the birth of these two babies God is remembering the covenant, He is going all the way back to Genesis 12 and saying, “Now I am going to do it! Now comes the seed of Abraham! Now

comes the salvation that I promised all along.”

You see, it was the conviction of the New Testament writers that God had finally come to answer the big question mark we call the Old Testament, that collection of books that constantly looked forward to mighty acts of God, but never came to completion. Now, THE mighty, ultimate act of God is finally here. In the Christ event, we have the fulfillment of everything that God promised in the Old Testament. Whatever the gospel is, it is based on the same covenant as the Old Testament. The Christ event is God’s action in harmony with that covenant. Lots of stuff happened in the Old Testament that wasn’t ideal, but God was working in it, preparing the world for what He was going to do in Christ.

2) Righteousness in the New Testament

Now if the Christ event is God’s action in harmony with the covenant, what would the Old Testament call that? Righteousness. The gospel is the revelation of Gods’ righteousness, in other words, Gods’ actions in harmony with the covenant. And this is front-row center in the New Testament’s outline of God’s mighty act in Christ. Look at Romans 1:16-17: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone that believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it was written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”*

The gospel is nothing less than a revelation of God’s righteousness. The gospel is about a mighty act of God in harmony with the covenant. It’s a revelation of how faithful God was to

the covenant. What God did in Jesus Christ was not arbitrary, it was part of a long-term, committed relationship with the human race. It was designed to bring the stability of God into the inconsistency of human experience.

Paul continues on the theme of God's righteousness in Rom 3:21-26. Rom 3:21: *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."* In this text we see why people struggle with the meaning of the gospel. Righteousness, by definition, means action in harmony with the covenant. Yet in Rom 3:21, this righteousness comes from God "apart from law" yet testified to by "the Law." Apparently there is a faithfulness to the covenant that is apart from law, yet it is in harmony with "the" Law.

The Law in Rom 3:21 (with the definite article) is actually a reference to the five books of Moses. Ancient Jews often referred to what we call the Old Testament as "The Law and the Prophets." "The Prophets" summed up the rest of the Old Testament outside the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. So Paul is saying that this "apart from law" righteousness does not contradict the Old Testament. In Christ God finds a way to rescue those who have failed to keep the law as a principle of life. But in doing so He is acting in harmony with the Old Testament.

Now if this righteousness from God is made known apart from law, how is it made known? Rom 3:20,22 (my translation) *"No one will be declared righteous by observing the law, . . . instead God's righteousness comes through the faith of Jesus Christ to all who believe."* The essential "contradiction" of the gospel then, at least to the western mind set, is this. The

gospel is a revelation of God's righteousness, which by definition is faithfulness to the covenant, but that revelation comes to us apart from law. God finds another way to save us than the "obey and live" principle of Deuteronomy. But this other way is not in contradiction to the Old Testament, it can be found there as well, as we have seen. This "apart from law" is not apart from the Old Testament. Whatever it is, it's something the Old Testament agrees with too.

Paul has already said (Rom 3:20) that righteousness (being counted right before God in the judgment) is not achieved by observing the law, since no one has ever been able to achieve such perfect righteousness. He then repeats this point in verse 23 (my translation): *"For all have sinned in the past and continually fall short of the glory of God."* Not only is our past record messed up before God but even our best efforts in the present fall short of His standards (not to mention our own, when we are being really honest with ourselves).

But Paul declares that God's righteousness is manifested in the middle of our mess *"through the faith of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:22)."* What does the "faith of Jesus Christ" mean? He elaborates on this remedy in verses 24-25. *"And (all) are justified (same Greek word as "righteousness") freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* God's mighty act of righteousness comes to us completely free of charge because the debt (to God's law) has been fully paid in Christ Jesus. God sent His Son Jesus to this earth to exercise the faithfulness to His law that Israel (and we too) had failed to exercise.

Rom 3:25-26: *"God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice for atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice (righteousness), because in his forbearance he*

had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished - he did it to demonstrate his justice (righteousness) at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus." The cross, above all else, demonstrates Gods' righteousness, His faithfulness to the original covenant with Abraham. God was never acting so "righteously" as when He sent Jesus to the cross. He found a way at the cross to justify the ungodly and still be faithful to His covenant.

So in the New Testament we see God acting in harmony with the covenant when He sends Jesus to live and die in our place. It is in harmony with the Old Testament covenant, yet it comes to us apart from the principle of "obey and live" that is at the root of the realities of this universe. As C. S. Lewis put it in the Chronicles of Narnia, God overcame the consequences of reality with the "deeper magic" of Christ's self-sacrifice. God found a way to justify the ungodly and still be faithful to His covenant.

3) Judgment and the New Testament

The New Testament doesn't stop with words like covenant and righteousness. The whole Old Testament concept of final judgment is also seen in what happened at the cross. John 12:31-32: *"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."* This text says that in some sense God's judgment on the world took place when Jesus was lifted up on the cross.

Now everything we have covered in this book so far starts to come together. The cross becomes the climax of all God's mighty acts throughout history. At the cross Jesus becomes the new Israel, the second Adam, the Son of David, all that stuff. Jesus Christ in His life relived the history of the Old Testament, Israel's history. Then at the cross he reaped the consequences of Israel's failure. On the cross, God's judgment against Israel, for centuries of unfaithfulness to the covenant, was exercised in the person of Jesus. Jesus hung on the cross as Israel's representative, He took their place.

Through the centuries people have tried to understand the full significance of the cross. But this much we know. At the cross God somehow put Jesus in the place where Israel was. At the cross, God's judgment was exercised upon Israel. And it is not just any judgment, it was **the** judgment of the whole world. It is God's final word on everything that matters.

You could say that the final judgment went into session one Friday afternoon in Jerusalem. Old Testament Israel, in fact the entire human race (going back to Adam), was summed up in the person of Jesus Christ. In His person Jesus was Adam, Moses, Israel, David,

everybody. And in His person, God condemned Israel. And as God looked down on the human race in the person of Jesus, He saw in Him millenniums of unfaithfulness to the covenant. And God poured out the curse, the condemnation, that Israel and the whole human race deserved, on its representative, Jesus.

Rom 8:3: *“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man,...”* “What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature” is a poignant statement of why Deuteronomy failed. Life could not come from human obedience because human beings were “weakened by the sinful nature.” The law was powerless to save because the whole human race had failed to obey it. Now all the sin of the human race was placed upon the Son of God and condemned in the death of Christ.

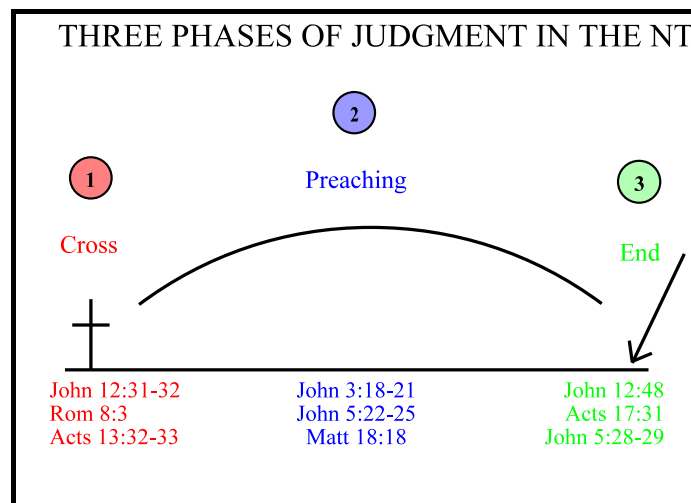
But, thankfully, the judgment wasn’t completed on Friday. Gods’ judgments are always two fold? They are both positive and negative. So the judgment at the cross adjourned and rested over the Sabbath. It then reconvened on Sunday morning. On Sunday morning God took a second look at the human race. And in this second look what did He see? He saw Adam as Adam was intended to be (in Christ). He saw Moses as Moses was intended to be (in Christ). He saw David as David was intended to be. He saw Israel as Israel was intended to be. He saw thirty-three years of perfect righteousness, of obedience to the covenant. The human race in the person of Jesus was faithful as never before. So when He looked upon Israel that Sunday morning, He could only say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The tomb could not hold

such perfect righteousness, and Jesus came forth.

The universal nature of the resurrection is well stated in Acts 13:32-33 (see also 1 Cor 15:20): *“We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. . .”* God fulfilled His promises to us by raising up Jesus? At first glance that does not make any sense. But in light of all we have covered in this book, it should make sense now. God’s promises are all about the covenant. Everything that God promised to His faithful Israel is listed in Deuteronomy 28. And all of those things were fulfilled to us when God raised Jesus from the dead. Because Jesus represented the whole human race.

So at the cross the end time judgment of the whole human race took place in the person of Jesus Christ. But doesn’t the Bible also talk about a time at the end when God will judge everyone in the whole world? How does that relate to the cross? To answer that we need to look at a few more texts. The judgment at the cross doesn’t end there, it continues in the preaching of the gospel. John 3:18-21: *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”* In this text Jesus is the light that has come into the world. But wherever the light of Jesus is presented judgment takes place. By their actions people place themselves for Jesus or against Him.

John 5:24-25 says essentially the same thing. Judgment didn't end at the cross, but continues every time the gospel is preached. Why? Because the gospel tells what Jesus Christ did, how on the cross the entire human race, including you and me, were judged. If you accept Jesus Christ, then you accept both aspects of that judgment. You accept both the condemnation on your own history and the approval of His perfect history. You could say that this is the second phase of judgment. The first phase is judgment of the whole human race at the cross. The second phase is the individual response to the judgment at the cross whenever the message of the cross is presented.



Phase three of the judgment is again on the entire human race. But the final judgment is not a different judgment in character, it's not some kind of double jeopardy. Basically, judgment number three is simply asking a question, "When you were confronted by judgment number two, what was your decision? The final judgment at the end of the world does not render a different verdict than the one we render on ourselves in phase two. It is simply

looking at the evidence of your decision and ratifying it for eternity.

Why go through all this trouble to understand the gospel? Because too often people attend a worship service or a Christian concert and they come away having experienced God, but 24 hours later they have forgotten all about it. A relationship with God has to be more than just a good feeling. Feelings come and go. A relationship with God must be built on a solid infrastructure of Scripture and accurate information.

I have written this book because I want you to be a different person not only now, but two, three, four years from now. And that can only happen if your understanding is built on a clear and compelling biblical foundation. It won't happen because you had an emotional high for three minutes yesterday or two weeks ago.

In order for me to have stability in my relationship with God I need to know that my standing with Him is not based on vindictive wrath or impulsive love. If God's impulsive love saves me today, then I am in big trouble tomorrow, because I know you can't count on impulsive love. I have three kids and I know something about impulsive love. "Daddy I love you so much." And then two minutes later they do the very thing that you had warned them not to do. And of course this works the other way too, if our impulsive love for God is the basis for our salvation we are in just as much trouble as if God Himself were impulsive.

The legal aspects of salvation are very important, because they assure us that the peace made by the cross is a lasting peace. It is not something that is up and down, based on God's whim or my faithfulness. God doesn't change His method of operation whenever He feels like it. The stability of the legal language provides genuine security. In this legal language God

binds Himself to the covenant that saves us. It is as if He says, “I am committed to your salvation. I’m not wavering, I’m not impulsive, I’m not vindictive.” It is the legal language that provides that kind of security.

In a country that is ruled by a dictator instead of law, there is no security. You never know when the knock on the door is for you. You could be the brother, the brother in law, or even the son, but if you are in the way of the dictator, it’s over. Unless a government is based on rule of law, there is nothing secure and stable there. Our God subjects Himself to the rule of law so we can know exactly where we stand and we can know how He will behave toward us.

You won’t find two versions of the gospel in the Bible. Both Old and New Testaments teach that salvation only comes through a mighty act of God. It never comes through the instability of human intentions. God’s righteousness was fully vindicated by the mighty act of Christ on the cross.

Now we are ready to unpack the full implications of this biblical picture. In the final section of this book we will build on the infrastructure of Scripture to lay out the basics of Christianity 101, how to get right with God and how to stay right with Him, how to have a relationship with God that doesn’t come and go with the wind and the weather. The infrastructure has been laid, the big picture has been painted, now it’s time to apply the message of Scripture to today.