

ARE BELIEVERS UNDER THE MOSAIC LAW?

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The New Testament boldly announces that believers are not under the Law. Paul says, “For you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). What does “not under law” mean? Several answers have been given.

One common answer is that believers are not under the civil and ceremonial law of the Old Testament, but they are still under the moral law of Moses, namely the Ten Commandments, which include the Saturday Sabbath. This explanation divides the Mosaic Law into three parts: the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. Then this explanation says that believers are not under the civil and ceremonial law, but they are under the moral law. Some who take this approach keep Saturday as the Sabbath and others observe Sunday as the Sabbath.

One of the problems with this answer is that nowhere in the Bible is the Mosaic Law divided into three parts. That is a man-made notion imposed on the Law. The Mosaic Law in a unit (see “whole Law” in Gal. 5:3 and Jas. 2:10).

Many modern scholars have concluded that believers are not under the condemnation of the Law. For example, Cranfield claims that the word “law” is used in this case in the limited sense of “law as condemning us.” His support is that “under law” is contrasted with “under grace.” Therefore, he reasons that Paul’s bold statement that believers are not under the Law means that believers are not under God’s condemnation pronounced by the Law, but under His undeserved favor (Cranfield, pp. 320, 338). If that is what Paul meant, why didn’t he say that?

Then, of course, there are those who say that not being under the Law means just that—not being under *any* of the Mosaic Law *at all*. If that is the correct interpretation, does that mean believers are lawless?

There are two basic questions: 1) What does “not under law” mean? 2) What does “under grace mean?” Several biblical passages answer these questions.

Romans 7

Not under the Mosaic Law In Romans, Paul declares, “For you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). That prompts him to ask, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (Rom. 6:15). Paul answers that question by making two points, both of which are introduced with the phrase, “Do you not know?” (Rom. 6:15; 7:1). First, Paul explains that believers have been made free from sin and now they should become slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-23). Second, Paul establishes that law reigns only as long as a person is alive (Rom. 7:1-6). The second of these two answers will be examined here.

Paul asks, “Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?” (Rom. 7:1). In the Greek text, there is no article before the word “law.” Paul is not referring to any particular law. At this point, he is talking about a general principle of all law. Life is filled with laws that

we must obey. We must drive on the right side of the street. We must pay taxes. We must not rob banks; but when we die, those laws no longer apply. Law only applies to people who are alive; it does not apply to people who are dead.

Paul elaborates on the point using the law of marriage as an illustration (see “that law” in verse 3). He says, “For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband” (Rom. 7:2). Marriage is life-long. If, however, the husband dies, the wife is released from the law of marriage. She is no longer married.

Romans 7:3 sounds like a repetition of Romans 7:2, but it is not. It is an expansion of the illustration in verse 2. Paul writes, “So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man” (Rom. 7:3). Marriage is for life. So, if a wife marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is an adulteress. On the other hand, if her husband dies, she is free from the law of marriage and can be married to another.

In other words, Paul illustrates that law reigns only as long people are alive by pointing out that a wife is bound to her husband only as long as he lives, but when he dies she is free to marry another person.

Paul applies the principle he has stated (Rom. 7:1) and illustrated (Rom. 7:2-3). He concludes, “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another; to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4). In the Greek text, there is an article before the word “law.” At this point, Paul is talking about a specific law, namely the Mosaic Law.

Through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:3), believers partake of the death of Christ (Rom. 6:4) and are placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Being united to Christ’s death means believers are dead; they are dead to sin (Rom. 6:2) and they are dead to the Law (Rom. 7:4). What does dead to the Law mean? Does that include the whole Mosaic Law? It is obvious that Paul has the moral law as well as the civil and ceremonial law in mind because he mentions coveting (Rom. 7:7).

Therefore, according to Romans, since believers have been placed into Christ’s death, they are dead to the Mosaic Law, including the moral law (the Ten Commandments; see coveting in Rom. 7:7).

Under Grace The purpose of believers being dead to the Law is “that you may be married to another, even to him that was raised from the dead” (Rom. 7:4). Believers being baptized into the death of Christ makes them dead to the Mosaic Law. Continuing his illustration, Paul says that believers being baptized into the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:4-5) means they are alive so they can be married to the Lord.

The purpose of our marriage to the Lord is “that we should bear fruit to God” (Rom. 7:4). Out of the intimacy of marriage comes the fruit of children. So, out of the intimacy with Christ comes the fruit of practical righteousness (Rom. 6:22).

The fruit, the wages, the end result of sin, is death (Rom. 6:23; 7:5). As the old marriage produced fruit, namely death, so should the new marriage should produce fruit. Thus Paul adds, “But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6). Believers have been delivered from the Law by their death to

the Law. The result of this death and deliverance is that believers are now able to serve in a newness of life (Rom. 6:4), a new life in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7:6), and not in the old way of trying to live by the written Law of Moses.

To sum up, believers are dead to the Law so that they can be alive to God and bear fruit. This means believers are not under *any of the Mosaic Law*, including the moral law (Ten Commandments).

Believers should live a new life by the Holy Spirit; they should not be living by the Mosaic Law; they are dead to it!

2 Corinthians 3

Not Under the Mosaic Law In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. He calls the Old Covenant “the letter” (2 Cor. 3:6), that which was “written *and* engraved on stones” (2 Cor. 3:7). He says while it was glorious, it is a “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9) and a “ministry of death” (2 Cor. 3:7). Paul calls the New Covenant “the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6). He says it is a ministry of righteousness (2 Cor. 3:9) that gives life (2 Cor. 3:6).

Paul goes on to say that the Old Covenant, the Law, is passing away (2 Cor. 3:11, 13). Keep in mind he is talking about that which was “written and engraved in stone,” that is, the Ten Commandments, which includes the Saturday Sabbath. The Law is transitory and temporary; the New Testament ministry is permanent.

Under Grace According to 2 Corinthians 3, what is the life of the Spirit like? Paul says, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). All believers can behold the glory of the Lord in the Scriptures and be transformed by the Spirit of the Lord into the image of the Lord from glory to glory.

Believers should live a life in the Spirit focusing on the Lord in the Word, having the Holy Spirit transform them into the likeness of Christ; they should not be living by the Mosaic Law because it is passing away.

Galatians 3-5

Not under the Mosaic Law In Galatians, Paul says, “Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24). Notice that “to bring us” is in italics, indicating that those words are not in the Greek text. In other words, Paul is saying the Mosaic Law was a tutor to Christ, that is, until Christ came.

The Greek word translated “tutor” means “guardian.” Greeks used to trust slaves to be guardians of their sons from six to puberty. Instruction was not the function of the tutor. He guarded the child against the evils of society and accompanied him to and from school. The function of the Mosaic Law was to protect Israel until Christ came.

Having stated that the Law was a guardian until Christ came, Paul goes on to say, “But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Gal. 3:25). Note: the Mosaic Law was a *tutor* (Gal. 3:24) and after faith has come, *we are no longer under a tutor* (Gal. 3:25; that is, the Mosaic Law).

The Mosaic Law here includes the moral law (the Ten Commandments), which includes the Saturday Sabbath. Later in Galatians, Paul says, “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Gal. 4:10-11). “Days” refers to, or at least includes the Saturday Sabbath. It probably also includes the feasts observed on single days (some took several days). “Months” refers to the monthly celebrations, the new moons. “Seasons” refers to those feasts that took more than one day, such as Passover and Pentecost. “Years” is a reference to the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee. In other words, the Galatian Gentile believers were choosing (see “desire” in verse 9, which means to will) to observe the ceremonial and moral laws of the Mosaic Law to try to secure divine favor. The Greek word “observe” means to observe scrupulously. They were painstakingly observing these laws.

No wonder Paul says, “I am afraid for you lest I have labored for you in vain.” (Gal. 4:11). Paul contemplates the possibility that his labor to make them mature had been a waste of time.

Under the Law of Christ Paul insists that Christ has set believers set free from the Mosaic Law and they should not return to it. He declares, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). The Galatians were already keeping the Sabbath (Gal. 4:10-11) and they were contemplating being circumcised (Gal. 5:2). Paul tells them that if they do that, they are “a debtor to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3).

As Paul explains, freedom from the Law should not be used as an “opportunity for the flesh” (Gal. 5:13; that is, as an opportunity to sin). Rather than living by the Mosaic Law or fleshly liberty, believers should walk by means of the Spirit so as to not fulfill the desires of the flesh, but produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22-23). They should, *by faith through the Spirit* (Gal. 5:6), *love others, that is, serve them* (Gal. 5:13).

In short, believers are freed from the Law of Moses (including the Saturday Sabbath of the Ten Commandments) and are under the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2), which is the law of love (Gal. 5:6, 13, 22; 6:2). They are under the royal law of love (Jas. 2:8).

Believers should live by faith through the Holy Spirit; they should not be living by the Mosaic Law; they have been freed from it.

Colossians 2

Not under the Mosaic Law In Colossians, Paul states, “Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14; see also Eph. 2:15). The phrase “the handwriting of requirements” is a reference to the Mosaic Law. The Ten Commandments were requirements written on tablets of stone by the finger of God. That Law was against us, or, to state the case a little stronger, it was contrary to us.

In His death on the cross, Christ dealt the death blow to the Law. That is expressed several ways in this verse. Paul says He “wiped out the handwriting of requirements.” The Greek word “wiped out” signifies a cancellation or an erasing. When a debt was canceled, a large “X” was placed over the document. In a similar fashion, the ordinances of the Mosaic Law declared that sinful man owed a debt of death; by His death, Christ canceled the debt. Secondly, Christ has “taken it out of the way,” which literally means He removed it; He carried it off. In the Greek text, this phrase is in the perfect tense,

indicating that Christ took it out of the way in the past and it is still out of the way. This describes a permanent removal. The believers do not need to fear that the penalty of a broken law will return later to haunt them. Thirdly, Paul says Christ “nailed it to the cross.” This may be an allusion to the ancient custom of nailing a copy of a nullified decree in a public place.

The writing against us has been erased. The document, contrary to us, has been torn up. The notice contrary to us has been cast aside. The believer has been freed from the Mosaic Law.

Paul goes on to say, “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths” (Col. 2:16). The word “therefore” points back to the preceding verses (esp. Col. 2:14), where Paul demonstrated that by His death Christ nailed the Law to the cross and thus eliminated it from the believer’s life. Now Paul gets specific, urging believers not to let anyone judge them in respect to the specifics of the Mosaic legislation.

When Paul says, “in food or in drink,” he is referring to the Mosaic dietary laws concerning clean and unclean food (Lev. 10:9; 11:34, 36; Num. 6:3). When Paul says, “a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths,” he is referring to the annual, monthly and weekly holy days on the Jewish calendar. The festivals were Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-18). The new moon marked the observance of the lunar calendar (Num. 10:10; 28:11; 1 Sam. 20:18). It was a day of rest, fellowship, worship, and eating. The Sabbath is an obvious reference to the weekly observance of Saturday. On that day, Israel did not work but rested and remembered the divine work of creation and her covenant relationship with God (Ex. 20:8-11; 31:12-18).

Paul insists that believers are not under the Mosaic Law. It has been nailed to the cross; it has been wiped out, taken out of the way (Col. 2:14). This includes the Ten Commandments, which was the only part of the Mosaic Law that was written by God. (It was written by His finger.) Paul goes on to say that believers died with Christ and, therefore, should not be subject to regulations (Col. 2:20).

Under Grace Paul declares that believers should not let anyone judge them concerning the specifics of the Mosaic Law because it was “a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Col. 2:17). The rules of the Mosaic legislation were shadows of things to come. The reality is Jesus Christ. Since believers are raised with Christ, they should set their minds on the things above (Col. 3:1) and love one another (Col. 3:14).

Believers should live as unto the Lord; they should not be living by the Mosaic Law. It has been nailed to the cross.

Hebrews 8

Not under Mosaic Law In Hebrews 8, the writer insists that the presence of the New Covenant not only demonstrates that the first covenant (the Mosaic Law) was not sufficient (Heb. 8:7), it shows that the first covenant is obsolete. He says, “In that He says [in the Old Testament] a new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13).

The word obsolete occurs twice in Hebrews 8:13. In the Greek text, the first appearance is in the perfect tense, meaning that the first covenant *has become obsolete*

with the result that it is obsolete in the present. The second occurrence is in the present tense, which seems to suggest that even though God has made it obsolete, it is still in the process of becoming obsolete. To say the same thing another way, the first covenant is growing old. As people grow old, they eventually die. Likewise, the first covenant is growing old. Death is inevitable. To use another figure, it is ready to vanish away the Greek word here means “disappear.” The form of the verb “vanish away” is used in James 4:14 of a vapor that quickly disappears.

At the time the writer penned these words, the ceremonies of the Mosaic covenant were still being conducted in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus had predicted that the Temple would be destroyed (Mt. 24:1-2). In 70 AD, the Roman general Titus did indeed destroy the Temple. From that moment to this, the rituals of the Mosaic covenant disappeared. When the writer wrote this Epistle, it was about to happen. Shortly afterward, it did.

Under Grace The point of the writer of Hebrews is that we have in Christ a High Priest (Heb. 8:1), who can sympathize with our weakness (Heb. 4:15) so we should come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). The writer warns his readers not to fall short of the grace of God (Heb. 12:15).

Believers should live by coming boldly to the throne of grace to obtain grace to live as God has instructed in the New Covenant; they should not be living by the Mosaic Law. It is obsolete.

Summary: Believers are not under *any* of the Mosaic Law, including the moral law (the Ten Commandments, which includes the Saturday Sabbath); they are under grace. By faith through the Spirit, they are to love others.

Believers are not under *any* of the Mosaic Law, including the moral law (the Ten Commandments), which includes the Saturday Sabbath. Romans teaches that believers are not under the Mosaic Law and mentions coveting (Rom. 7:7), which is part of the Ten Commandments. Second Corinthians says the Mosaic Law is passing away and specifically speaks that which was “written and engraved in stone” (2 Cor. 3:7); that is, the Ten Commandments, which includes the Saturday Sabbath. Galatians says believers are not under the Mosaic Law and specifically mentions the Sabbath (Gal. 4:10-11), which is part of the Ten Commandments. Colossians says the Law has been wiped out, taken out of the way and talks about “the handwriting of requirements” (Col. 2:14), a reference to the Ten Commandments, and specifically includes the Sabbath (Col. 2:16). Hebrews says the Mosaic Law has become obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

There is a danger in trying to live under the Mosaic Law. Paul declares, “Sin taking opportunity by the commandment produced in me all manner of evil desire” (Rom. 7:8). The Law not only reveals sin, it also *stirs up sin*. The Law is not sin, but it causes sin. How can the Law cause sin? Paul personifies sin and says it took “opportunity” when the Mosaic Law came along. The word translated “opportunity” means “starting point.” In the context of war, it was used of a foothold or beachhead. When the Mosaic Law comes, it reveals sin. That consciousness of sin becomes the foothold for the Mosaic Law to arouse all manner of evil desires. Commenting on this verse, the great Greek scholar A. T. Robinson said, “The command not to lust made me lust more.” No wonder Paul says living by rules and regulations has “no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col.

2:23). Living by Law does not work. It may make one self-righteous and possibly judgmental, but it does not—it cannot—produce conformity to Christ.

Does this mean that believers are lawless? NO! Believers are under the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21), which is love, and love fulfills the Law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:13-14). “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love *is* the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). For example, the Mosaic Law says, “Do not steal,” but there is no power in the Mosaic Law to keep that law. On the other hand, if believers by the grace of God practice love, they will not steal. *Loving God and other people by the grace of God, fulfills the Law.*

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote, “Romans 7 is one of the most misunderstood chapters in the Bible because most people read it with the attitude ‘It can’t mean what it says!’ The theme is that the believer is no longer under the law of God because he has been joined to Christ in His resurrection. Like an inexperienced swimmer, the average Christian stands in terror of such deep water as complete abandonment to the grace of God. He fears to be borne along on will of God in his daily life—to cast himself completely on the direction of the Holy Spirit. But, once he gets over the panic of such self-abandonment, he finds that the grace of God sustains, carries, cradles, and calms him—and he lives eternity in time. This is the purpose of Romans 7: to help the willing believer to cast himself into the depths of grace.”

As Griffith Thomas wrote, “This instruction about the law is necessary, because of the danger to believers being in bondage to the law, and not enjoying the liberty of grace.”

Some believers are in bondage to the Law. They focus on it, painstakingly try to keep it, and convert others to it. Just talk to a law-keeper. All they want to talk about is the Mosaic Law! They seem to think that if they can just persuade people to keep the Mosaic Law, their job is done. They are in bondage to the Law and want others to join them in their bondage! Law-keeping tends to produce pride and a judgmental attitude toward others who do not agree with them.

Believers who live by grace are focused on the Lord, not the Law. They, by faith through the Holy Spirit, love people, which produces humility and graciousness.