

**The Church of God, International
Bible Correspondence Course**

LESSON 9

**The Law
and the Christian:
"Under the Law"?**

What does the great apostle Paul really think about the law? Those who would not keep the law are quick to cite Paul. Are they right, or are they making the very mistake Peter warned against (II Peter 3:15-17). In this lesson we will examine those passages often used by those who would abandon the law, and will come to understand what Paul is really saying about the law. One of the great misunderstandings in Paul's writings revolves around what he meant by the expression under the law, and what he was saying in the many passages where he truly sounds like he is opposed to the very idea of the law. If you have studied the preceding lessons, you will see immediately how strange this idea is, but there are those areas to be dealt with, nevertheless. We will begin this lesson with a thorough study of the expression under the law and proceed from there to address the problem texts in Galatians and elsewhere.

"Under the Law"

Only Paul uses the phrase under the law, and he only uses it in Romans, I Corinthians, and Galatians, so it should not be too hard to study. Unfortunately, none of the New Testament writers anticipated our difficulties in understanding what they wrote. They do not always use words with the precision we would like, and the meaning of a phrase can often turn on the idea being developed by the writer at the time. In other words, it may depend on the context.

There are also idioms to deal with. Random House Webster's Dictionary defines an idiom as "an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the usual grammatical rules of a language or from the usual meanings of its constituent elements, as kick the bucket 'to die.'"

"Under the law" is a little closer to the underlying meaning than "kick the bucket," but it is still an expression that carries meaning beyond the three words found in your Bible. Paul's style is very elliptical-that is, economical in expression or use of words. He is given to shortcuts and expressions that carry more meaning than is at first apparent.

So when we study his use of "under the law," careful attention to the context may help us to understand what he is saying-and what he is not saying. We have covered some of these scriptures in a preceding lesson, but we bring them in again here for clarification.

Romans 3:19-20

1. The law is said to speak to a certain category of people. Who are those people?
2. What is the object of the law speaking to these people?
3. In a careful consideration of verse 19, is it possible to conclude that it is only the Jewish (or Israelite) people who are "under the law"?
4. Was the activity or utility of the law described here limited to the time before the crucifixion, or was it current as of the writing of the book of Romans?
5. What is the condition "before God" of those who are "under the law"?
6. Is it possible from this passage that only those who were under the Old Covenant were "under the law"?
7. If the Gentiles were not "under the law" then how could their mouths be stopped by what the law says? How could they become "guilty before God"?
8. Does this passage conclude that the whole world is "under the law"?
9. According to Paul in this passage, what is it that defines sin? (verse 20)
10. Is the law that defines sin the same law that Paul spoke of being "under"?

Note: We have seen John's definition, that "Sin is lawlessness." Now we learn from Paul that the law defines sin and that it is the same law of which he says, "What the law says, it says to them who are under the law."

Romans 6:12-23

11. Is it possible for sin to have dominion over a man? Would he then be "under sin"?
12. How does one get out from under the dominion of sin: by works of law, or grace?
13. Remember parallel structure? What phrase in verse 14 is parallel to the phrase, "sin shall not have dominion over you"? What phrase is in contrast (inverse parallelism)?
14. When one has broken the law, does the law then make certain claims, certain demands?
15. If the law can make claims upon our lives because of our sins, can we be said to be under the law?
16. If a man is no longer under the law, is he then free to do the things that the law defines as sin? (verse 15)
17. Can we determine that Paul is making any distinctions as to which law he is talking about?
18. Is the law one is "under" any different from the law that defines sin?

Romans 7:1-25

19. How long does the law have dominion over a man?
20. If the law has dominion over a man, can he be said to "under the law"?
21. In this passage, Paul draws on the analogy of marriage, and concludes that the death

of the husband liberates a woman from the "law of her husband." What effect does the death of the husband have on the law itself?

22. In the analogy, the woman is free to be married to another. Would she then be bound by the law to the new husband or would she be free to sleep around?

23. In verse 4, Paul shifts to the object of the analogy. How do we become dead to the law?

24. According to Paul in verses 5-7, what is it that defines sin?

25. How is that we are delivered from the law?

26. If we are dead to the law, what does that suggest about our former relationship to the law?

27. What law is Paul talking about here? Is it merely the ceremonial?

Note: The law requires our death for the transgressions we have committed against the law. The law has dominion over us in the sense that it claims our lives. When we become dead to the law, we are liberated from its claims. To be under the law is to be under its claims because of sin. From verse seven on in this chapter, Paul often uses personification to discuss sin. Personification is "the attribution of a human nature or character to inanimate objects or abstract notions, esp. as a rhetorical figure." In other words, Paul speaks of sin as though it were a person, thinking, planning, working, deceiving. This passage is difficult if one tries to take it literally rather than as the figure of speech Paul intends.

28. Was it the law or sin that "slew" Paul?

29. What was the weapon the killer used? (verse 11)

30. Is the law sin?

31. What was it that enabled Paul to recognize sin for what it was? (verse 7)

32. Was the law a bad thing?

33. What was it that actually "worked death" in Paul?

34. Considering what Paul has said earlier about being guilty of sin even when one does not know the law, how can we understand verse 9? (See verse 13 also.)

35. How does verse 13 confirm what you know about the definition of sin?

36. How would you describe Paul's attitude toward the law in the "inward man."

37. Did Paul see the law as a physical thing?

38. Did Paul believe it was right to obey the law of God?

39. Now pause and consider what Paul seems to mean when he speaks of being "under the law," and of being delivered from the law. Does being delivered from the law free a man to commit sin?

40. Does being out from "under the law" mean that the law no longer defines sin?

Note: One thing becomes clear. The phrase "under the law" does not merely mean "under an obligation to keep the law." All men are under that obligation. But because all men have sinned, all men have come under the discipline of the law. If the law requires death, then man is under the penalty of the law. I Corinthians 9:20 is easily understood if we understand "under the law" as under the discipline of the law.

Galatians 3:10-29

41. Is Paul saying that the obeying the law brings a man under a curse?
42. How does a man come under the curse of the law?
43. Is the question under discussion whether one should obey the law, or whether the law can justify?

Note. Verse 11 may well be the topic sentence of the epistle to the Galatians. The problem addressed in Galatians is not the keeping of the law, but legalism. Legalism is defined as "strict adherence to law or prescription, especially to the letter rather than the spirit; or the theological doctrine that salvation is gained through good works." The heresy of the Galatians was that one had to achieve salvation by circumcision and works of law—a form of legalism.

44. Had the Galatians been "under the curse of law" and in need of redemption?
45. Had the Israelites of old been justified by works of the law? (verse 11)
46. The word redeem means "to buy back." Write a short paragraph for yourself explaining what it means in verse 13, especially in the light of Leviticus 25:47-55 and Romans 7:14.
47. Is being "under the curse" essentially the same thing as being "under the law"?
48. Does being "under the curse" come about from keeping the law or breaking the law?
49. Must the Gentiles also be redeemed from the curse of the law? (verses 13,14)
50. Did the law give life in Old Testament times?
51. Did righteousness come by the law in Old Testament times?

Note: Verse 23 and 24 require translation notes. The word kept in the KJV is translated "kept in custody" in the NASB, and "imprisoned and guarded" in the NRSV. These are terms one uses for law breakers, not for law abiding citizens. The word schoolmaster (KJV), or tutor (NASB), is the Greek word for pedagogue. Pedagogue, in English, has come to mean "teacher," but in the early Greek society, a pedagogue was literally "a guide to boys." He was the custodian to see to it that the young man—who would likely disobey unless watched carefully—got where he was supposed to go. The relationship between "kept in custody" and being "under a custodian" adds to the understanding of this passage.

52. When a young man grew up and left the supervision of the custodian, was he then free to do the wrong thing?
53. We are no longer "imprisoned and guarded" by the law. Are we now free to break it?
54. If we once again begin to live in sin, is it possible to find ourselves under the law again?

Galatians 4:1-10

Note: Chapter 4 will develop the analogy of the schoolmaster or pedagogue still further. An analogy is defined as: "A similarity between like features of two things, on which a comparison may be based." When we use an analogy, we take something with which people are familiar and use it to explain something they do not understand so well. Paul is fond of analogies, but we are often not familiar with either side of the comparison.

Galatians 4:1-5 is an analogy in which two sides are connected by the phrase "even so" at the beginning of verse three. In this case, it is as easy to go to the object of the analogy as to try to understand the connection.

55. What might Paul be describing by the expression "elements of the world." (verse 3. See also Colossians 2:8.)

56. Is Paul describing the law in terms of bondage, or is he speaking of something else?

57. Jesus is said to have been "made" or "born under the law." How did Jesus come to be "under the law."

Note: Paul does not here use the customary word for "born," but rather the word normally translated "become." What he says here literally is that Jesus came of a woman and came under the law. He wanted to use the parallel construction, but the usual word for "born" might have led his readers to misunderstand. Jesus came under the law because he took our sins upon Him.

58. Were the people to whom this section is addressed Gentiles or Jews?

59. Did these people formerly worship the true God or false gods? (verse 8)

60. Paul says they were turning back into something. Would that something have been the Old Testament worship of God or Gentile customs?

61. They were turning back again to "weak and beggarly" elements. From what you have studied so far, would you think Paul would describe the law of God as "weak and beggarly"?

62. Are these elements the elementary things of God, or the elements of the world?

Note: The word for "elements" or "rudiments" as used by Paul is the Greek word *stoicheion*. It comes from a verb that means to march, as in (military) rank. It is a reference to Greek religious customs that had rigid rules of conduct. The word comes into our language as "stoic," an adjective that means "of or pertaining to the school of philosophy founded by Zeno, who taught that people should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submit without complaint to unavoidable necessity." What this passage says is that a person who is in bondage under the elements of the world is also "under the law" and must be redeemed from that condition by the Son of God. Note further the phrase "how turn ye again" in verse 9. The construction is emphatic in that it say one not only turns, but turns back or turns again to the "elements." Paul is writing to former pagans who were returning to their old practices.

63. Is it then possible for the days, months, times, and years of this passage to be referring to the holy days of Leviticus 23?

Note: It is important to acknowledge that Paul's main thrust here is not the question of obedience to any law, but of justification by law-any law. The Galatians had fallen into legalism and, curiously, some had returned to pagan customs in the process. But of course the Greek religions were no strangers to legalism.

64. Now write your own one paragraph summary of what you think Paul meant by the phrase "under the law."

When we finally come to understand the real purpose of the law, a lot of things become clear. The law was not given to bring a man into a right relationship with God, but simply to define the difference between right and wrong, between what hurts and what works. It makes no more sense to speak of the abolition of law than of the abolition of light. Man's problem is the great mountain of trouble he has made for himself by ignoring the law. Getting out from under that mountain is not possible by works of law. That is a work of grace.

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