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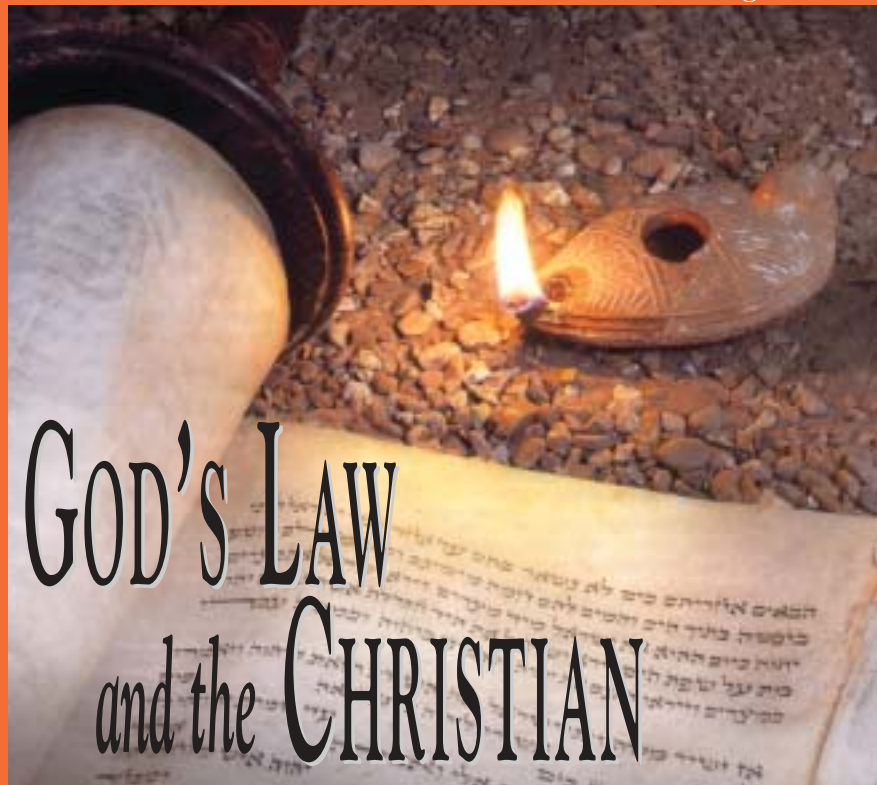
Bridges for Peace

Israel

Teaching Letter

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GOD'S LAW and the CHRISTIAN

Editor's note: The author of this Israel Teaching Letter is the Reverend Noel Sanderson, the ministry team leader of the Olive Tree Congregation in Durban, South Africa, who is also director of Christian Action for Israel and an adviser to Bridges for Peace. He is currently authoring a special pastor-to-pastor letter to graduates of our BFP Pastors Forum, a one-day course on Israel and the Hebraic roots of Christianity. I invited him to bring this powerful message on the concept of "law" as described in the Book of Romans.

One of the most misunderstood words in the entire Bible is the one we Christians translate as "law" or "the Law." In Jewish terms, it is understood as Torah, or *halachah*, a Hebrew word whose root meaning is "walk" or "way." Remember, Psalm 119:105-106 says, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow Your righteous laws." For the Jewish people, God's laws were not bondage, but an expression of His love, in that He chose to tell us how to live our lives righteously and receive the abundance of His blessings.

Unfortunately, the average Christian's attitude to the Law is very negative. Christians have been steeped in a religious environment that is dismissive of the Law, as if God had made some terrible mistake that needed to be rectified by the grace found in the New Testament. However, there is grace or *hesed* in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and, at the same time, over 1,000 laws or precepts found in the New Testament. In other words, the Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, gave both grace and law in both testaments. He never changes.

In the New Testament, Paul, in his letter to the beloved saints in Rome, writes about six laws, one of them being Torah. Each of these laws represents domains of power and influence in our lives. In this *Teaching Letter*, I will discuss each of these uses of law to enhance our understanding of this important concept found throughout the entire Bible.

THE MOSAIC LAW (TORAH)

The Mosaic Law is also referred to as the “Law of Moses” (1 Cor. 9:9) or “God’s law” (Rom. 7:22). For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the Law of Moses as Torah throughout this message. This will help distinguish it from the other “laws” Paul writes about in Romans. This is the heart of the entire Bible and, for Jewish people, the very foundation of their knowledge of God. At the center of Torah is what we call the Ten Commandments, although the entire first five books of the Bible are considered to be Torah.

Paul writes of this Law, “*For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified)*” (Rom. 2:12–13).

There are three essential aspects of the Torah that I want to consider.

1) TORAH WAS WRITTEN BY GOD.

Christians tend to focus on the fact that it was written on stone and, as such, it is considered cold, clinical, harsh, and judgmental. There is a tendency immediately to contrast this with the grace, mercy, and gentleness of Yeshua (Jesus). The result is that the Torah is often rejected out of hand as something that has no place in the life of a Christian believer. Sadly, our Christian focus is often on the stone and not on the hand of God that wrote upon the stone.

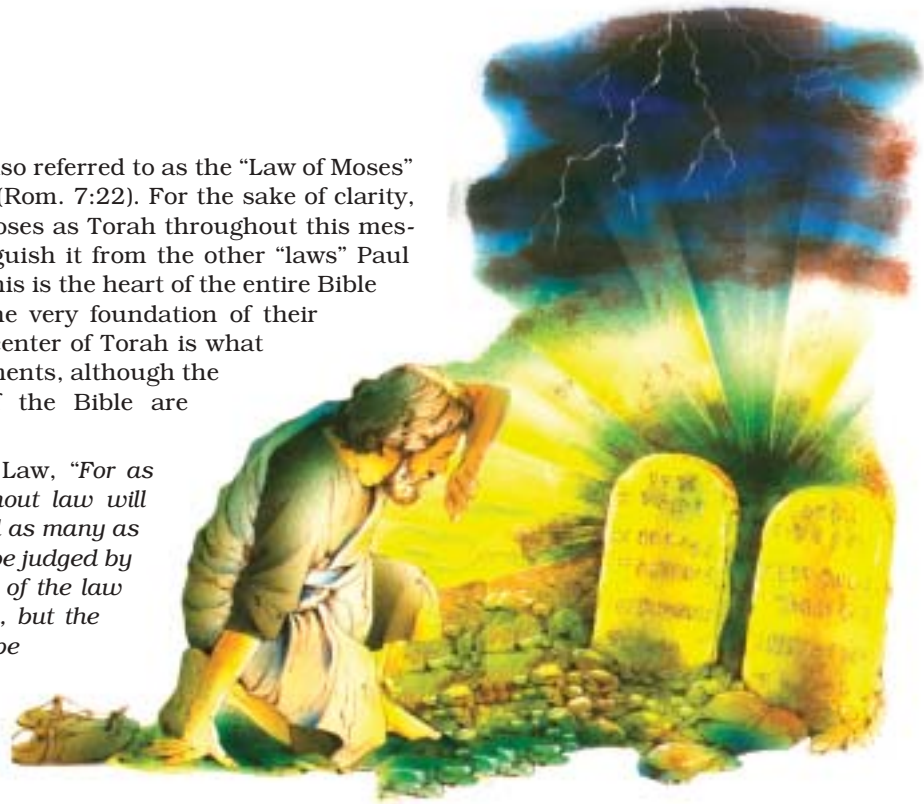
Paul wrote, “*You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart . . . But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?*” (2 Cor. 3:2–3, 3:7–8).

Can we afford to dismiss with disdain what God has written and our New Testament describes as “glorious,” even if it was written on stone? If we do, we will be a poorer people for it and, in many respects, rightly considered blasphemers by some Jews for rejecting the heart of Holy Scripture. By extension, this is considered to be a rejection of God.

2) TORAH REVEALS THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD. In it, we find the nature, character, and fiber of God revealed to us. The question is, “How righteous is God?” Much time could be spent debating how holy or righteous God is. We know He is without sin, without compromise, perfect in every way. The point is that in terms of holiness, God is ahead of us—way ahead in every respect. If we ever want to spend eternity with Him, in His presence, and before the throne of His glory, we must be like Him.

The Torah reveals that we are not like Him and can never be like Him, at least not without His grace. If the Torah teaches us how holy God is, it also teaches us how short we are of that perfection, without which we cannot see God. Torah reveals His wholeness and my great need. Torah takes me to the edge of the precipice of hell and lets me see what life without God will usher me into. This must lead me to ask if there is an alternative, which there is. God shows us this is to be found in the Messiah—who takes away the curse of lawlessness (life without Torah within me) and grants to me the gift of eternal life.

3) TORAH IS NOT IN CONFLICT WITH GRACE. Torah and grace are not enemies. We need both if we are to appreciate fully and explore the potential of our relationship with God. Torah and grace are

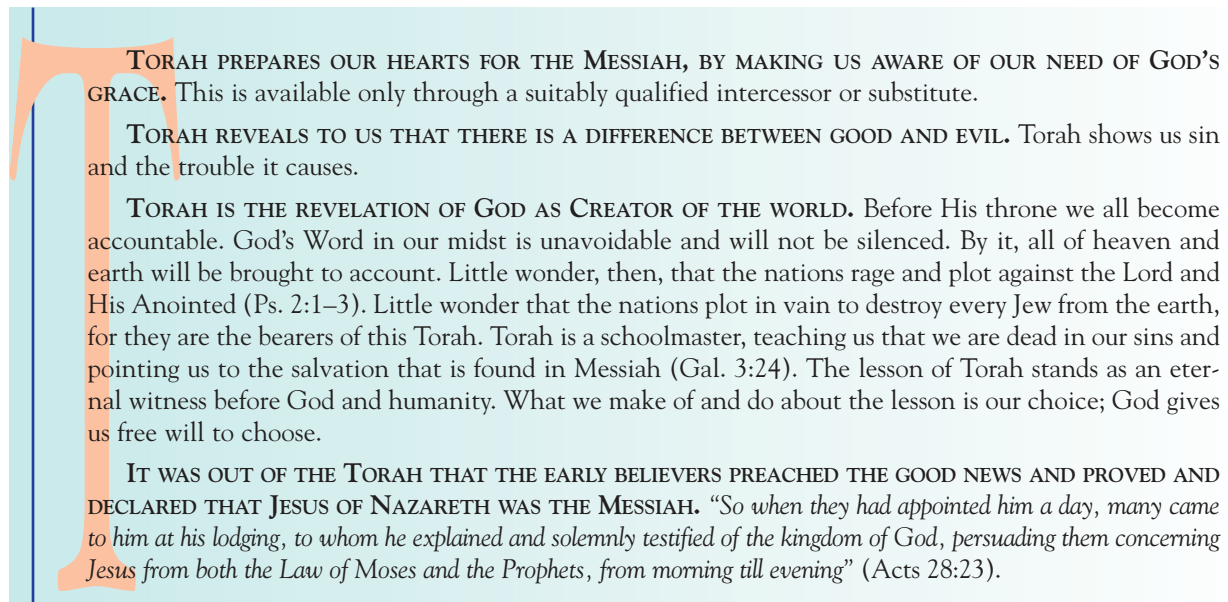


complimentary and necessary for us to have a fuller and deeper appreciation of our great salvation.

Paul in Romans 7 describes Torah in the following way: *“Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good”* (7:12). He also says, *“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin”* (7:14). Paul by no means taught contempt for Torah. He had a high regard for Torah and a sober view of his own sinfulness, in light of the revelation of God’s holiness as taught in the Torah. But it was the grace of Messiah that had lifted Paul from the death state, which the holy, perfect, good, and spiritual Law had revealed to him as his true condition before God.

Christianity without any notion of Torah has no eternal and universal standard against which to value the magnitude of the grace of God. Consequently, it is no wonder that so many Christians live lives without reverence for God or any sense of deep devotion before the cross. Grace without Torah is cheapened and leads to irreverent living and a powerless witness. Torah without grace is death.

Ultimately, Torah sets before us the unattainable standard of God’s perfection. Nothing we do in or of ourselves will close the gap between ourselves and God. So then, we must consider four basic purposes for Torah:



TORAH PREPARES OUR HEARTS FOR THE MESSIAH, BY MAKING US AWARE OF OUR NEED OF GOD’S GRACE. This is available only through a suitably qualified intercessor or substitute.

TORAH REVEALS TO US THAT THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. Torah shows us sin and the trouble it causes.

TORAH IS THE REVELATION OF GOD AS CREATOR OF THE WORLD. Before His throne we all become accountable. God’s Word in our midst is unavoidable and will not be silenced. By it, all of heaven and earth will be brought to account. Little wonder, then, that the nations rage and plot against the Lord and His Anointed (Ps. 2:1–3). Little wonder that the nations plot in vain to destroy every Jew from the earth, for they are the bearers of this Torah. Torah is a schoolmaster, teaching us that we are dead in our sins and pointing us to the salvation that is found in Messiah (Gal. 3:24). The lesson of Torah stands as an eternal witness before God and humanity. What we make of and do about the lesson is our choice; God gives us free will to choose.

IT WAS OUT OF THE TORAH THAT THE EARLY BELIEVERS PREACHED THE GOOD NEWS AND PROVED AND DECLARED THAT JESUS OF NAZARETH WAS THE MESSIAH. *“So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening”* (Acts 28:23).

The biblical basis for the gospel is in fact Torah itself, and not the four books we find at the beginning of the New Testament, which we call the “gospels.” These four historical books, i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are records of the life and ministry of Yeshua and are built on the theology and Messianic expectation found in Torah. Without the first five books of the Bible, the four gospel books are inadequate representations of the Messiah and the Messianic mission, which is to redeem humanity from a lost eternity.

The Torah is fundamental to the story, and the four books of the gospel are the “therefore” to the Messianic prophecies of God, fulfilling God’s plan to redeem humanity fully to Himself. This is fulfilled in Yeshua and the redemptive work He accomplished on the cross. But Yeshua Himself reminds us, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”* (Mt. 5:17–19).

Therefore, if we have little or no knowledge of the Law of God when much of the Church rejects the Torah, we lose the very foundation of God’s redemptive plan. When we cannot recognize the Jewishness of the historical Yeshua, or even why this is important to the whole redemptive plan of God, we miss much of the beauty and brilliance of God’s plan. As God is revealing all of this to the Church today, there is often dismay and even anger by some Christians who do not understand and embrace the present restoration by God’s Spirit of a knowledge of the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. These studies are meant to enhance our knowledge of God and His redemptive plan and help us be better disciples of Yeshua, not distract us or draw us away. Hebraic-roots teaching is not Judaizing, but contextualizing for clarity and a deeper understanding of God’s Word.

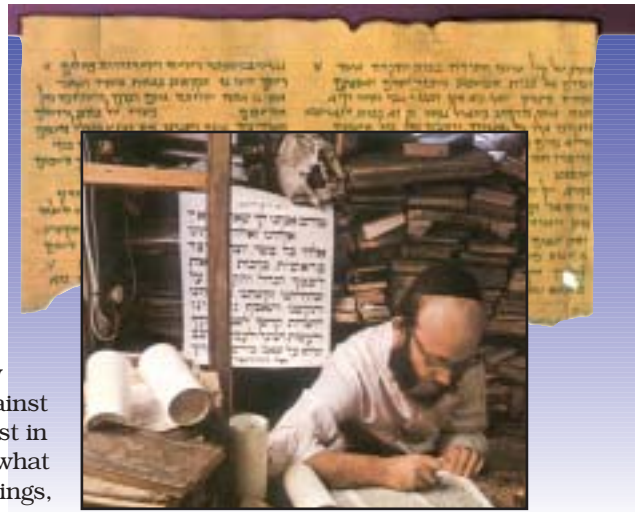
THE NATURAL LAW

“(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them)” (Rom. 2:14–15).

There is a natural law written by God on the hearts and minds, or consciences, of all human beings whom He created. By design, in creation, God set within all humans a capacity for His Torah to be written on the tablet of the conscience —what we often describe as the heart. However, this natural law has been corrupted by the habit of sin, or rebellion against performing what we inherently know to be right and just in our heart. This natural capacity for knowing God and what God requires of us has been filled with corruptible things, such as idolatry, paganism, and spiritual rebellion.

This capacity is, nevertheless, a law written by God deep within all people. It remains, in essence, indelibly imprinted on the conscience of humanity. Vulnerable, broken, it awaits the work of the Holy Spirit to draw us to salvation in Messiah. This law, written on our conscience, suffers when it is dulled through habitual compromise, when it is ignored or suppressed, and when we deliberately embrace practices and values that are the antithesis of everything holy and good.

This natural law exists to guide those who do not yet have the Torah (the Law of Moses) and an understanding of the Messiah, and who are nevertheless pure in heart and seekers after the God who created them.



THE LAW OF WORKS

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27).

The previous two laws are the creation or handiwork of God: Torah, which was written on stone, and the natural law, which was written on the conscience. The “law of works,” however, is the creation of man. It reveals our own idolatrous nature and our great capacity for pride in our own spiritual efforts. It is frequently placed on the backs of both the Torah and the natural law, obscuring the divine laws provided by God.

The law of works is a deliberate effort by man to establish his own righteousness apart from God, but is, nevertheless, intended to impress God. The essential understanding of this law is in the realization that it is the product of *unbelief in God* and *belief in self*. The works produced by this law are quite possibly righteous in appearance, but carnal in essence, origin, and motive. They are consumed in the fire of His judgment (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

THE LAW OF FAITH

Again, *“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27).*

The “law of faith” stands in stark contrast to the law of works. While the law of works can be quite easily identified



and observed, the law of faith deeply challenges us, for it requires us to offer to God our own faith (even the smallest amount), together with our utter devotion to Him.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt. 6:5).

"But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Josh. 22:5).

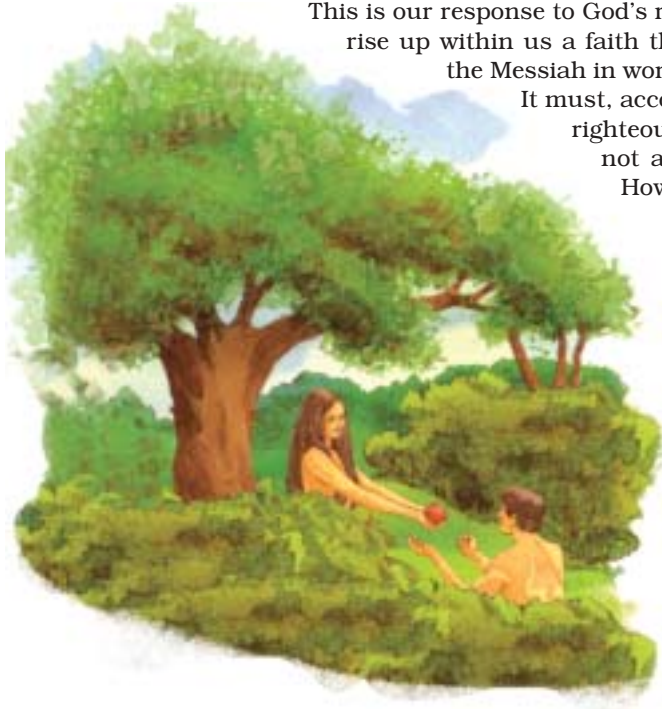
"Yeshua said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind'" (Mt. 22:37).

"For by grace you are saved, through faith; not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

This is our response to God's righteousness, grace, and truth. Together, these cause to rise up within us a faith that builds on the foundation of Torah and brings us to the Messiah in worship and service. The law of faith does not exist for itself.

It must, according to James, produce works that are in every respect righteous. ". . . Faith, without works, is dead" (Jas. 2:26). This is not a contradiction. Works do not save us; only faith does.

However, true faith will be demonstrated in our lives by works and fruit of the Spirit, which can be seen by all men and by God as the evidence of the salvation that is within us.



THE LAW OF SIN

The "law of sin" is a law that exercises enormous power over the passions we all possess as humans. It is built into us. As Christians, we call it "original sin," emanating from the sin of Adam and Eve, and it infects all mankind. Judaism calls it the "evil inclination." When our passions are dominated by this law, sin results. It particularly affects the physical passions of our bodies and can overpower our will. At times, it is so powerful that, if we don't run into the arms of the Lord, it will overtake us. The result is a great battle within us.

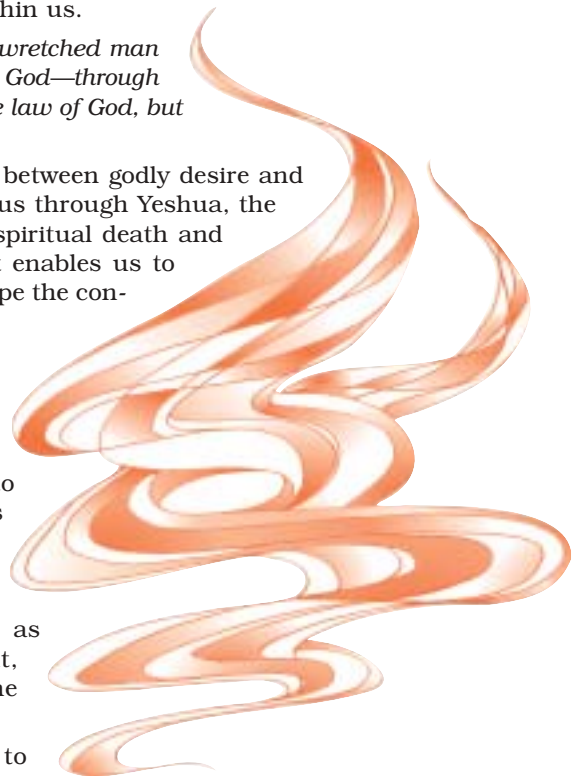
Paul describes this battle in the following passage: *"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin"* (Rom. 7:24–25).

The antidote to this inner, spiritual battle that rages between godly desire and the demands of the flesh is the grace of God that comes to us through Yeshua, the Messiah, who is God. Only God can deliver the soul from spiritual death and satanic domination. It is the grace of God in Messiah that enables us to meet the perfect and holy requirements of Torah and so escape the consequences of being under the law of sin.

THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

After His resurrection, Yeshua told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was necessary for them to receive the Holy Spirit, if they were to go forth and fulfill His command to take the good news to all the earth. It was the Holy Spirit who would activate or empower the confession of their faith in Yeshua as Messiah. It is through the presence and work of the Spirit, making real and accessible the death of Yeshua, that the law of sin is defeated.

It is the convicting work of the Spirit that draws us to the knowledge that we are far short of the standards of Torah



(God teaching us that He is perfect and Holy). The law of the Spirit does not displace Torah, but underlines the lessons of Torah. The Spirit draws our attention to the fact of our sin, and then directs our eyes to the grace to be found in the Messiah.

SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO US?

Christians need to reevaluate their attitude to the five books of Moses, without making the mistake of bringing themselves under the law of works. The Torah as a teaching and the grace that is ours in Messiah need to be harmonized into a seamless cloak or garment. In Messiah, the righteous requirements of Torah are met in full, and we access that blessing by faith in Messiah's work on the cross. Appreciating one's Jewish roots is not a call to come under a legal code or pretend to be Jewish if you are not. It is a restoration of a deep and genuine relationship with all of Scripture and the setting of individual faith into a context that properly explains Israel, the Jewish people, and the Church in the course of history.

Lest you consider the Law of the Hebrew Scriptures as bondage, consider the beautiful description given to us by the psalmist: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward"* (Ps. 19:7–11).

Consider also these verses: *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers"* (Ps. 1:1–3).

Many thanks to my friend and colleague, Noel Sanderson, for this insightful message about the Law of God. May it help us to become stronger Christians and to appreciate the whole counsel of God's Word, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

**The commands
of the Lord
are radiant,
giving light
to the eyes.**

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding, YES! That is why I am sending out this *Israel Teaching Letter*. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem"* (Isa. 2:3).

