The Circumcision of the Heart

On the Law That Could Not, and the Son Who Trapped Sin in His Own Body

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How a Command Lands

There is nothing closer to the heart of God than gratitude. When someone in our assembly testifies of a gratefulness that reaches back across decades, to the year and the people in whom they first found the Lord, it reminds us of something easily forgotten. *Time has a way of either hardening or softening.* And the remembrance of the goodness of people, of their acts of love, can become the most transformational thing of all.

And so it is with love, and so it is with law and command. An act of kindness can be received in two completely different ways depending on the state of the heart that receives it. Have you ever had someone be kind to you when you were *not feeling it*, and the kindness only made you angrier *because* they were being nice? It happens. We have all done it. And what is true of an act of kindness is true of a command. A command can come to you, and depending on the state of your spirit and your mind, that command can have a positive effect that brings life, or a negative effect that brings death, anger, frustration. *The same command, two different effects, all depending on the heart that receives it.* That is the territory I want to walk through this morning.

The Law in Six Verses

Look at Psalm 107:33–38. In these six verses you have the entire promise and challenge of the law of Moses compressed into a single passage:

> He turns rivers into a wilderness, and the watersprings into dry ground; a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of those who dwell in it. He turns a wilderness into pools of water, and dry land into watersprings. There He makes the hungry dwell, that they may establish a city for a dwelling place, and sow fields and plant vineyards, that they may yield a fruitful harvest. He also blesses them, and they multiply greatly; and He does not let their cattle decrease. (Psalm 107:33–38)

If you wanted to summarize the entire law of Moses in a single short passage, you could not do better than these six verses. Rivers turning into wilderness because of wickedness. Wilderness turning into pools of water because of God's mercy. Two directions of motion, depending on which direction the heart of the people is facing. *That is the law of Moses in miniature.*

Compare it to Leviticus 26, where Moses lays out the same two directions at length:

> If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit . . . You shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid . . . Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight . . . (Leviticus 26:3–8)

From verse 9 on, the chapter essentially says: *if you will be faithful, I am going to restore the Garden of Eden among you*. Then verse 14 turns the corner:

> But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments . . . I will appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever . . . I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies . . . (Leviticus 26:14–17)

And then the chapter walks step by step through what Leviticus calls *my four sore judgments*: war that prevents the planting of harvests, which leads to famine, which leads to malnutrition, which leads to pestilence, and when the population is too thin to defend itself, the wild beasts come in. *That is the second half of Leviticus 26.* The promise of bounty if you obey; the promise of devastation if you do not.

And the chapter before, Leviticus 25, sets the same logic out in social terms: the Jubilee, that there would never be perpetual poverty among the people of God, because the just acts of the people within community would ensure that *no one was perpetually poor*. The righteousness of God toward his people was to be exemplified by the people toward one another. Those were to be *first-class seats in the kingdom of God*. No one would find themselves sitting in coach.

"I Have Set Before You Life and Death"

And now look at Moses standing at the threshold of the promised land, about to die, knowing his people are about to cross over without him. Deuteronomy 30:19:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Hear the *plea* in that verse. There is God, sitting at the end of forty years of leading these people, *begging* them to choose option A: life, abundance, the restoration of Eden. *I beg you, choose life.* The voice of a parent at the edge of leaving, pleading with children to make the right choice.

Back up one chapter. Deuteronomy 29:9:

"Therefore keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do" (Deuteronomy 29:9).

The commands of God were meant to make his people prosper. They were the gift of his wisdom, his word, given so that they would know how to be fully human. This was the same gift offered in the garden. *Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat* (Genesis 2:16). One tree was forbidden, *in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die*. Adam and Eve listened to the voice of the serpent who suggested the words of God were *not in their best interest*, and chose the voice of the beast over the voice of God. And from the garden onward, the human condition has been the *consequence of that exchange*.

Now hear Deuteronomy 29 carefully, because something larger is being announced than just a covenant with Israel:

> I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, but with him who stands here with us today before the Lord our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today . . . (Deuteronomy 29:14–15)

This command for life *was not only for Israel*. It was for him who stood there and for him who was not there: the generations to come, the nations far off. Hear Peter at Pentecost echoing exactly this language:

"For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

Same shape. *To you, to your children, to those afar off, to as many as the Lord shall call.* Pentecost was not the inauguration of a new covenant unrelated to the old. Pentecost was *the*

fulfillment of what Moses had announced at the threshold of Canaan, *this command of life is not for you alone*.

"I Shall Have Peace"

But then comes the warning. Deuteronomy 29:18:

". . . so that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God . . " (Deuteronomy 29:18).

The battleground is for the heart. Always. Who has our heart today? That is the question that decides everything else. And Moses goes on to describe the specific kind of person whose heart is at risk:

> . . . and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my heart', as though the drunkard could be included with the sober . . . (Deuteronomy 29:19)

I shall have peace, even though I follow the dictates of my own heart. That is the voice of the serpent in Eden; *you shall not surely die*. Moses is warning Israel that *they are not exempt from the condition of Adam*. The same heart that justified itself in the garden will justify itself in the wilderness, will justify itself at Sinai, will justify itself in Canaan. *They are not exempt.* And so neither are we.

And read what follows:

> The Lord would not spare him; for then the anger of the Lord and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the Lord would blot out his name from under heaven. (Deuteronomy 29:20)

I read that verse, and I felt both the powerful conviction of God *and* the powerful glory of God. Why? Because of what I know about what Paul will eventually say in Romans 8, and what

the first-century church understood had happened on the cross. *Jesus became the curse for us.* Paul says it explicitly in Galatians 3:13:

"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')" (Galatians 3:13).

So when Moses says *every curse that is written in this book would settle on him*, what we now know is that *all of those curses got heaped up on the one*, on Jesus. *Every curse settled on him.* The Lord would blot out *his* name from under heaven, and on the third day, *raise him up* under a name above every name. The dark verse of Deuteronomy 29 is exactly what the cross *absorbed*.

Pity for Israel

And here is something I have been thinking about lately. For years I was quick to judgment over Israel. How could you possibly have come through the Red Sea, seen the plagues on Egypt, watched the manna come down from heaven, and then while Moses was up on Sinai receiving the commands of God, build a golden calf and dance to the gods of Egypt? How could you?

And then, reading these verses lately, my heart has begun to feel something different. *Pity.* Pity for the nation of Israel. Because what God was doing in their election was setting them apart as the one nation through which all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), and that separation, that distinctive calling, that holiness in the eyes of the world, made them *a target*. The very thing that was supposed to be a blessing became, in the eyes of the surrounding nations, a reason for suspicion and judgment and destruction.

If Abraham could have looked four hundred and thirty years, or five hundred, or nine hundred years into the future and seen all the hell his descendants would go through *because of*

the blessing of God, air quotes around *blessing*, would he still have gone? God had given them commands meant for life. Those commands required separation from the wickedness around them. That separation made them visible. That visibility made them vulnerable. And men and women across thirty centuries took the law of God onto themselves anyway, and bore the weight of public faithfulness in the heart of the fertile crescent, on the trade routes that led to every major nation of the ancient world. My pity grew. My appreciation grew. *In them, all the nations of the world were to be blessed.*

And we have seen that blessing fulfilled. The promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he gave himself and died, and then sent the promise of his Spirit. The whole arc holds together. But it has cost something, to Abraham, to his descendants, to his ultimate Son, and to all who follow.

"I Will Circumcise Your Heart"

God *knew*, all along, what was in his people. He knew the commandment would be given to them, and he knew they would not be able to fulfill it. *Choose life*, he said in Deuteronomy 30:19, but they were *incapable* of choosing life. Why? *Because of the weakness of the flesh.* Adam was still their father. They were incapable of choosing life by the strength of their own will.

So watch what Moses says next:

> Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God drives you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice . . . (Deuteronomy 30:1–2)

Moses is already telling them: You are going to fail. You are going to be driven into exile. And in exile, you are going to remember these words. And then comes verse 6:

"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

The Lord your God will circumcise your heart. It was a heart problem all along. The flesh that encompassed the heart was where the weakness lived. That is where sin entered after the sin of Adam. *Sin entered into the flesh, and the mind that was given over to the flesh was now under the control of sin.* Sin was dominating us the way Pharaoh dominated Israel. And as long as we are given over to that flesh, we cannot please God.

But God says: *I am going to circumcise your heart*. The same promise speaks through Jeremiah:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31, 33)

And through Ezekiel:

> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes . . . (Ezekiel 36:26–27)

A new heart. The heart of stone removed. The flesh that surrounded the heart cut away. That is the circumcision of the heart Moses announced six centuries before Jeremiah and Ezekiel announced it again, and twelve centuries before the cross of Christ accomplished it. The promise

of life was going to come because of a work God was going to do in us, to cut away the flesh where the problem was.

Why We Have Backed Away From the Hard Verses

So why is there a *dark* side to the law? Why does the same Torah that promises Eden also promise pestilence and exile? *Because the law was holy and just and good* (Romans 7:12), and yet it did not give us the power to obey it. It called us to life but did not provide the means.

And what has the Christian world done with the dark side of the law? We have backed away from it. We have stopped preaching the judgment verses. *Why?* Because the judgment verses have been *improperly applied* for so many years by Christian leaders. People simply trying to live their lives found themselves under condemnation that the gospel never intended for them to bear. So we recoiled. We left the judgment verses behind. And in doing so, we lost something important, *the diagnostic clarity* that the law provides about the human condition.

The right answer is not to delete the judgment verses but to *read them in the light of the cross*. Paul's whole argument in Romans 7 is that the law is *good*, and that recognizing what the law says about us is the first step toward understanding what Christ has done *for* us. The judgment verses tell us what was actually at stake. The cross tells us what was actually accomplished. Take either away, and the gospel becomes either a moralism or a sentimentality.

Romans 7: The Inner Civil War

So let me walk us through Romans 7 and 8 quickly. Paul is reflecting on his pre-baptismal life, what it was like to be a man under the law without the Spirit. Look at 7:10:

> And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. (Romans 7:10–12)

Notice the verb. *Sin*, not the commandment, *deceived me, and by it killed me*. The agent of death is not the commandment. The agent of death is *sin operating through the commandment*. The commandment is the *occasion*, not the cause. *Sin took occasion by the commandment.* Just like the serpent in the garden took occasion by the command not to eat. The serpent did not invent the commandment; he weaponized it.

Have you ever been caught in a moment where you *will not* to do a thing, and you do it anyway? *That* is the experience Paul is describing:

> For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. (Romans 7:15–17)

There is *the I of the mind* that acknowledges the goodness of God's word and *wills* to obey it. And there is *sin that dwells in me*, which has its own will and overrides the mind's good intent. Two laws operating within the same person. *Just as the law itself has a bright side and a shadowy side, so does the human person who receives it.*

And Paul cries out:

"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

Who will deliver me? That is the cry for rescue. We need to be delivered from Pharaoh, who has us in bondage. We need to be delivered from the serpent, who has us under his foot. We need to be delivered from the *capital-S Sin* that dwells in us, that shadowy presence that has had every generation of humanity under its control. *Who will deliver me?*

Romans 8: The Trap God Set for Sin

And then Romans 8:1: the answer:

> There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1–2)

No condemnation. Why? Because the law of the *Spirit of life* in Christ Jesus has *freed me* from the law of *sin and death*. The shadowy law that operated in my members has been broken by a stronger law operating from within me through the Spirit.

And then verse 3, one of the most important verses in the entire New Testament for understanding what actually happened on the cross:

> For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh . . . (Romans 8:3)

Read that carefully. He condemned sin in the flesh. Not He condemned the Son. Not He condemned Jesus. He condemned sin, and the location where the condemnation happened was in the flesh of the Son.

Get the wrong theology out of your head here. God did *not* simply take his wrath out on Jesus the way an angry parent vents on a child. What God did was *set a trap for sin in the body of his Son*. Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, and as Israel's Messiah, *all of Israel's collective being was caught up in him*. In his flesh, God drew sin in, like a hunter baiting a snare. *In the likeness of sinful flesh, for sin, he condemned sin.* The Son was the bait; the cross was the trap; *sin* (capital-S Sin, the shadowy creature that had ruled every human life since Eden) was the one caught.

And on the third day, when the Son rose from the grave, *he came out of the trap, and Sin did not*. Jesus' vindication was Sin's condemnation. Sin was left in the tomb. *That* is what Paul

means by *He condemned sin in the flesh*. Are you still fighting Sin today? *Sin has been condemned.* Believe it. Let the Spirit of God dwell in your mind. Let it grow up richly. Let your mind be renewed by the power of God's presence in you.

The Righteous Requirement Fulfilled

And then comes the consequence:

". . . that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4).

The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. This is critical. The law has not been *deleted*. The law has been *fulfilled,* and the fulfillment is happening *in us*, not just *for* us, when we walk according to the Spirit. *The law is filled up. The law has been filled.* Every righteous requirement of the Mosaic covenant can now be lived out in the body of a Spirit-led believer.

This is why, as Christians, we should not pretend there is no longer any law for us. The righteousness of the entire arc, from Abraham to Moses to the prophets, from David to Isaiah's suffering servant, from Psalm 2's anointed king to the eternal covenant of 2 Samuel 7, all of that righteousness was looking forward to a time when God would send his own Son, in whom all the sin of all of Israel and all of humanity would be heaped up. And in that one body, on that one cross, *Sin would be trapped and destroyed*. And out of that trap would come a people in whom the *righteous requirement of the law* could be lived out by the *Spirit*.

Paul continues:

> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. (Romans 8:5–6)

The mindset matters. As long as our mindset is on the flesh, we will pursue the things of the flesh, and we cannot please God. *But if our mindset is on the Spirit*, we *can* please God. The same Pauline argument that started in Romans 7 with *who will deliver me?* lands in Romans 8 with *set your mind on the Spirit*. The deliverance has been accomplished; the mindset is what receives it.

The Indwelling and the Resurrection

And then comes the climactic promise:

"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is dwelling in you. You have become the temple of God. The *Shekinah glory* of God dwells in you. You are a habitation of God. *How could a body that has become the dwelling place of God remain in the grave?* Of course it will be raised. Of course it will be glorified. *It is the house of God.* That is the promise of life God has given every one of us.

But the condition is the mindset. We have to be set on the Spirit. That is the daily work. *Choose life*, Moses' word from Deuteronomy 30, comes back at the end of Romans, just before the famous exhortation that closes the argument:

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)

By the mercies of God (that is, on the basis of everything Paul has said in chapters 1 through 11) *present your bodies a living sacrifice*. The reasonable response to the trap God set for sin in his own Son's body is to *offer your body* in return. *Living* sacrifice. Not dead. Not consumed. *Living*. The body that the Spirit indwells is the body that becomes the place where the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled day by day.

Choose life. Choose the Spirit. Set your mind on the things that are above. Allow God to fulfill in you the promises he has made. *Every day, choose life.* That is how the dark verse of Deuteronomy 29 ends in the bright morning of Romans 8.