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ANSWERING: THE VERSES GIVEN AGAINST TORAH VALIDITY

Pastor: No one will be justified by the Law. “Because by the works of the Law no one will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). If the Law were able to impart life, then righteousness would have been based on the Law (Galatians 3:21). But it can’t, so it isn’t. The following verses show that Christians are not obligated to keep the Old Testament Law.

The pastor lists various Scripture passages which we analyze point-by-point following these remarks.

“No one will be justified by the Law. ‘Because by the works of the Law no one will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin’ (Romans 3:20).”

The pastor is entirely correct in asserting that justification does not come by the Torah of Moses. Whether we consider such “justification” (Heb. *tzedaqah*, תְּצַדִּיק; Grk. *dikaïosunē*, δικαιοσύνη) to be “declared righteous” (Romans 3:20, NIV) and wiped clear of our sins, *and/or* we approach it from the perspective of being reckoned a part of God’s people because of trust in Him—Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) and what He has accomplished in His sacrifice for human sin is to be **the focus** of justification and *who He is* should define *who we are* both individually and corporately (Romans 3:22).¹ Recall how Moses was clear to tell the Ancient Israelites that the very reason why they would be able to enter into the Promised Land was *not* because of their own righteousness, but rather because of the utter wickedness of the Canaanites:

“Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, ‘Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,’ but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD is dispossessing them before you” (Deuteronomy 9:4).

In a similar manner, none of us can be reckoned as the Lord’s own because of anything we have inherently done of ourselves. Because of our mortal limitations, we can *only* turn to Him and what He has done in Yeshua to be “justified,” even with all of the different elements of “justification” to be considered. *This key Biblical concept should never be in dispute.* It may be true that there are various Messianic people out there who one will encounter, who do actually believe that they are “justified” and cleansed of their sins, precisely because they “keep Torah.” This is a grossly false assumption on their part, because keeping commandments to earn salvation—*versus* keeping commandments as a part of being sanctified—is often a result of bad Bible teaching and/or unbalanced spirituality. These are people who our broad Messianic faith community must internally contend with (and they can speak rather loudly), with teachers and leaders issuing corrections when necessary.

¹ For a collection of useful thoughts, consult N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

The pastor's quotation of Romans 3:20 is not inappropriate: "because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin." The traditional vantage point for interpreting this verse is that observance of Biblical commandments will not merit a person salvation. Obviously, salvation *only comes* by receiving Yeshua as one's Personal Savior, and by being spiritually regenerated with a heart and mind fully filled up with and changed by God's love.² No group of people who claims to follow the Savior is exempt from those who look to their various actions to merit them salvation. There are many people in evangelical Protestantism who think they are saved because they do certain "works." The foremost of these things is Christians who think they are redeemed simply because they go to Church on Sunday and have some kind of denominational membership. So let it be repeated once again:

Those seeking redemption through observance of Biblical commandments, or adherence to any code that they have developed, will not attain it. Good works are to follow salvation (Ephesians 2:10), *not* be the agency of obtaining salvation.

While the pastor uses Romans 3:20a to support the view that any form of Torah-keeping will not bring justification, not enough of today's Christians understand the focus of Romans 3:20b: "since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (RSV). While earning a place in the Kingdom of God is utterly impossible, there is no legitimate reason for His people to ignore the Torah and remain largely ignorant of what He considers to be acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Is it at all significant that in Romans 3:20b the term *epignōsis* (ἐπίγνωσις) or "full knowledge" (LS)³ is used? In the view of *Vine epignōsis* means "exact or full knowledge, discernment, recognition,"⁴ being slightly different from the more common word *gnōsis* (γνώσις), which only means, "a seeking to know, an enquiry, investigation" (*Vine*).⁵ Paul's words fully align with John's words that sin is lawlessness or a violation of the Torah (1 John 3:4).⁶

The main purpose of the Torah is not to define "justification," but is rather to reveal the sin of human beings. C.E.B. Cranfield observes, "the condition of all men is such that the primary effect of the law in relation to them is to show up their sin as sin and themselves as sinners."⁷ Thankfully, though, even though human inability to keep God's Law is present (or is skewed when "works of law" become a means to rigidly define how groups *have* to keep the Law), the Torah's primary goal in relation to the salvation experience is to reveal the sin of an individual, so he or she can know that a Divine Redeemer is required (Romans 10:4, Grk.). We have to look *beyond the Torah and Prophets* to the One these writings inevitably point us to: Yeshua the Messiah (Romans 3:21-24). The precise reason is "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), with all people having broken God's Law and deserving of its full punishment. John R.W. Stott validly reflects,

"Our...response to Paul's indictment, then, should be to make it as certain as we possibly can that we have ourselves accepted this divine diagnosis of our human condition as true, and that we have fled from the judgment of God on our sins to the only refuge there is, namely Jesus Christ who died for our sins. For we have no merit to plead and no excuse to make."⁸

² We do have to consider that while Paul plainly attests that human action will not bring one justification before God, that there has been much discussion in contemporary Pauline studies about what *ergōn nomou* (ἐργων νόμου) or "works of law" specifically was in Second Temple Judaism. Per the usage of the parallel term *ma'asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה) in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QMMT or 4Q394-9), Paul is refuting the view that justification, more akin to membership in God's people, does not only not occur via any kind of human action, but here a specific type of human action: the Torah *halachah* or judgments of an ancient sect of Judaism.

The main "works of law" Paul would be criticizing here are that non-Jewish people do not have to become proselytes in order to be reckoned members of God's covenant people. Paul's view is that entry into God's covenant community, "justification," does not occur via accomplishing "works of law" but instead having trust in what Yeshua the Messiah has accomplished (Romans 3:22).

A more detailed discussion is offered in Chapter 11, "What Are 'Works of the Law?'"

³ LS, 289; "consciousness" (REB), but actually rendered as "full knowledge" in LITV.

⁴ *Vine*, 348.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ For Romans 3:20b the 1993 German Elberfelder Bibel has "denn durch Gesetz kommt Erkenntnis der Sünde." The term *Erkenntnis* means "perception; realization; understanding; phls. cognition; a. pl. idea; discovery; finding" (*Langenscheidts New College German Dictionary, German-English* [Berlin and Munich: Langenscheidt KG, 1995], 194).

⁷ Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 199.

⁸ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 104.

The main purpose of God's Torah is to define human sin, and reveal our inherent need for a Savior. And for the Believer, who has God's commandments written on the heart by His Spirit as promised in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), following the Torah comprises what it means to be holy. But a Torah obedience as a part of the good works our Father expects of us, by no means negates the fact that our faith in the Lord *must remain primary*. **One's justification must always be focused around Messiah Yeshua, what He has done for us, and the trust we are to place in His atoning work.**

Paul writes in Galatians 3:11, "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH' [Habakkuk 2:4]." Abraham was justified by his faith in the Lord (Galatians 3:9), because he picked up his entire family from Ur and moved to a Promised Land that he had never seen. As he expressed his total confidence in God, Abraham certainly had to obey Him. This not only involved following God's various "laws" (Genesis 26:5) that he learned through his interactions with Him, but most especially the request that he sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19).

While the concept of "justification by faith" is sometimes believed to be something which originated in the Protestant Reformation with Martin Luther and others, there is no avoiding how in Galatians 3:11 the Apostle Paul quotes from Habakkuk 2:4: "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." Those seeking the Lord as attested by the Prophet Habakkuk had to reach out in faith and put their complete trust in Him. One of the most intriguing statements appearing from the Rabbis of the Talmud is how faith in God is the *single* most important principle of the Torah, with Habakkuk 2:4 offered as substantiation:

"Isaiah again came and reduced them to two: 'Thus says the Lord, (i) Keep justice and (ii) do righteousness' (Isa. 56:1). Amos came and reduced them to a single one, as it is said, 'For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel. Seek Me and live.' *Objected R. Nahman bar Isaac, "Maybe the sense is, 'seek me' through the whole of the Torah?"* Rather, [Simelai continues:] **'Habakkuk further came and based them on one, as it is said, "But the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4)'**" (b.Makkot 24a).⁹

The most common Hebrew word for "faith" appearing in the Tanach Scriptures is *emunah* (אֱמוּנָה). HALOT gives a number of possible meanings of *emunah*, including: **"steadfastness," "trustworthiness, faithfulness," "honesty,"** and **"permanent official duty."**¹⁰ The root *a-m-n* (אֱמֵן) serves as a base for a whole array of important terms, each of which conveys the concept of support, reliability, certainty, and establishment. "This very important concept in Biblical doctrine gives clear evidence of the biblical meaning of 'faith' in contradistinction to the many popular concepts of the term. At the heart of the meaning of the root is the idea of certainty" (TWOT).¹¹ Not at all to be overlooked is how *emunah*, depending on the context, can be rendered as either "faith" **or** "faithfulness."¹² The point taken is that one cannot have faith in God, without to some degree being faithful to Him, incumbent with the right obedience (cf. James 2:17-18, 20).

One of the most common expressions not only witnessed in the Bible, but something that graces the prayers and feelings of followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob everywhere is **"Amen"** (*amein*, אָמֵן; *amēn*, ἀμήν). The expression *amein* means **"Verily, truly"** (TWOT),¹³ perhaps understood as meaning "so be it" or "I consent."

The main Greek equivalents of the Hebrew *emunah* are the noun *pistis* (πίστις) and verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω), respectively, which are employed throughout the Septuagint and Apostolic Scriptures.

Nowhere in the Holy Scriptures is "having faith" viewed as being something completely separate from obeying God, "faith" being something non-tangible that is just a kind of head knowledge or belief that one just has *without* actions following it. *Having faith and obeying the Lord always go together*. Consider how the Lord says, "Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful [verb *aman*, אָמֵן] in all My household" (Numbers 12:7). Moses was not only faithful because he kept the charge of the Lord, but also because he obeyed the Lord.

⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

¹⁰ HALOT, 1:62-63.

¹¹ Jack B. Scott, "אָמֵן," in TWOT, 1:51.

¹² Ibid., 1:52.

¹³ Ibid.

Obedying God's commandments comes as an outworking of one's faith, or one's assurance and confidence in the truth.

It is undeniable that Messiah followers are called to have faith. We are called to have faith because we must put our lives in the complete control of God. As we put ourselves entirely in the hands of God, we must have the internal assurance that regardless of what happens in our lives, He is in charge and will guide us along the appropriate path. We must have the confidence of knowing that He will honor us for the difficult "faith" decisions that we have all had to make. We must have the fortitude to endure the trials of life, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:3).

In an effort to avoid having to heed Moses' Teaching, even sometimes to just read and study the Pentateuch as a matter of Biblical history, some like to quote Galatians 3:12a: "the Law is not of faith." Does this actually mean that the Torah is of no relevance for Believers today who have faith in Messiah Yeshua? This statement must be counterbalanced with what the author of Hebrews communicates, as he says "faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Likewise, it must also be counterbalanced with the fact that Paul himself further asserts, "we know that the Law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14). The Torah is not something that is inspired by mere mortals; its Author is God Himself. It is not to be dispensed with on a whim. *We are to listen to its instruction.*

Realize that the Torah or the Law of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, can be seen and touched and read. These five texts make up the foundation of all of Scripture. The Torah speaks of the experiences of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, and the trials that the Ancient Israelites endured. It teaches us valuable lessons that we need to know for our lives today (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:11). The Torah is surely of "*the* faith" in the sense that the Pentateuch is a critical part of the Bible, is Divinely inspired, and is to be highly valued by us. The Torah not "*of* faith" in that Scripture can only take us *so far*. Yeshua rebuked some of the religious leaders of His day, not because of their love for and study of the Scriptures—but because they failed to realize that the Scriptures were to point to Him:

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

Yeshua's further statement is "if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me" (John 5:46), as Moses' Teaching is to reveal who the Messiah is. Any claim that the Torah is not of "*the* faith"—meaning as valuable instruction for the community of God's people—is to be rejected as utterly false. But it is quite true that the Torah, or for that matter all of Holy Scripture, *does not* teach God's people how to handle *all aspects* and circumstances of their lives. It is a reality that we are going to encounter things in our lives that the Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Epistles, etc., do not specifically address. The Bible surely informs us as to what God's character is, or would/should be in various matters, **yet it is imperative that we have a vibrant relationship with Him.** We need assurance to make the right choices in life, especially regarding those things where even an extra-Biblical tradition, Biblical commentary, or books on various subject matters may be relatively silent. This is where the Lord's presence residing within our hearts, and the faith we place in Him and the communion we have with Him, are definitely to come into play.

The Torah is not "*of* faith" *only* in the sense that there are things that it does not address, that we must by necessity seek the Lord about. But that does not mean that we ignore the Torah's direction, because the Torah does tell us what God considers acceptable and unacceptable, and how we are to properly conduct ourselves in holiness. Following the Torah will keep us on the narrow road, so that we can truly reach toward those things of faith: those things that are truly unseen in life and require us to place ourselves entirely in our Heavenly Father's care.

"If the Law were able to impart life, then righteousness would have been based on the Law (Galatians 3:21). But it can't, so it isn't."

The intention of the pastor referencing Galatians 3:21 is to establish how eternal life cannot come through any kind of Torah-keeping. While this key truth has not been disputed in our examination, the pastor's partial quote of Galatians 3:21 is rather misleading, as the verse in its entirety reads: "Is the Law then contrary

to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.” The Apostle Paul candidly writes that the Torah, which is surely from God, is not “opposed to the promises of God” (NIV).

While it is quite clear that the Law of Moses is most incapable of giving a person eternal life and salvation, verses like Galatians 3:21 are often used to communicate that the Torah is really of no concern for Believers. Are we to assume that our pastor thinks that the Law of Moses has no spiritual value? He probably does not, but in not quoting “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be!” (Galatians 3:21a, NLT), he does not help those evangelical Protestant people who do not receive consistent, godly instruction from the Tanach or Old Testament. The pastor has referenced a passage which plainly testifies to how God’s Torah is not contrary to God’s promises. Sadly, we find far too many people today who believe that the Torah, the foundation of the entire Bible, is of very little spiritual value. At most, such individuals think that studying the Torah might be necessary for one to have a handle on some Biblical history, but really nothing other than that.

Of course, while the Apostle Paul communicates in Galatians 3:21 that the Torah is incapable of giving one eternal life, what are we to make of the question: “Then is the Law against the promises of God” (LITV)? The answer to this question quite directly is *mē genoito* (μη γένοιτο): “May it never be!” (NASU), “Certainly not” (RSV), or “Absolutely not!” (NIV). God’s Torah is not opposed to God’s promises, especially as the promise of God to Abraham was that through his seed all of humanity would be blessed. This Seed is Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus), and the message of Him is surely contained in the words of the Torah (Genesis 22:18; cf. Galatians 3:16; Luke 24:44; John 1:45).

Galatians 3:21 communicates that the source of righteousness for God’s people is not to come from the Torah; the Torah’s instruction is to instead lead people to the Messiah (Galatians 3:24). God reckons as righteous those who have received Yeshua the Messiah into their lives, being spiritually regenerated and forgiven of sin. *Such a righteousness comes only through our trust in Him.* But at the same time, are we to dispense with the commandments of God that define what sin is? Do we cast aside the ethics, morality, and code of conduct established in the Torah? Are we then to live lives without any limitations of what is and what is not acceptable? Sadly, this is what some teach, or at least seem to imply by their teachings. Thankfully via the growth and expansion of today’s Messianic movement, many people are seeing the fallacies of this, seeking the Lord in a much fuller context of what He originally intended.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:1-2, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” As Believers, while we have been forgiven of our sins and while we are covered by God’s grace, we are not at all permitted to then go and violate the very things that condemned us as sinners. The commandments of God are to be inscribed on our hearts as part of the promised New Covenant, and we should be empowered to keep the commandments of the Torah through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because we are limited human beings, when we do err, we claim the salvation of Messiah Yeshua and ask the Lord for forgiveness. We have the Holy Spirit and God’s Word to convict us when we do something wrong.

Answering the Claims

“The following verses show that Christians are not obligated to keep the Old Testament Law.”

Each of the passages listed—whether in the pastor’s original paper, or added to the list later—is preceded by its reference, and then a paraphrase of a common evangelical Christian interpretation. The verse has then been quoted from the 1995 *New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition* (NASU), which among conservative Protestants has often been considered to be one of the most literal Bible versions available, and

notably uses *italics* to indicate most words that have been added to the English translation,¹⁴ as well as putting quotations or allusions from the Old Testament in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS. Other major English versions I consult include the Revised Standard Version and New International Version. When references to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures are necessary, the text used comes from United Bible Societies' 1998 *Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition*, which is identical to the text used in the 27th Edition of Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graecae*. This critical text is used in most modern translations of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament).

Where available, various entries have been transplanted from volumes of the *for the Practical Messianic* commentary series by Messianic Apologetics.

¹⁴ **Italics** are used in the text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it" (*NASB Text Edition* [Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997], v).

It is notable that most of the words added to a version like the NASU concern the placement of various "to be" verbs, where they may be lacking in the Hebrew or Greek source text, but are necessary in order for a clause or sentence to make good sense in English. We, however, should be more concerned with the addition of *italicized* words that clearly reflect a value judgment of the translators (i.e., Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 9:24; 10:1). The NASU has an advantage over other mainline versions like the RSV/ESV, NIV, or even the CJB and TLV, because it makes the effort of providing such terms in *italics*.