

## THE SOURCE OF THE LAW

### CALL TO WORSHIP (Psalm 46)

*God is our refuge and our stronghold,  
a timely help in trouble;  
so we are not afraid though the earth shakes  
and the mountains move in the depths of the sea,  
when its waters seethe in tumult  
and the mountains quake before his majesty.*

*There is a river whose streams bring joy to the city of God,  
the holy dwelling of the Most High;  
God is in her midst; she will not be overthrown,  
and at the break of day he will help her.*

### INVOCATION

Holy One, it is by receiving you that we can give again. It is by following you when it makes no sense that we find freedom. We claim every grace, *Abba*, to no longer hold back from any risk you demand of us. We claim your every medicine to be healed of indifference. And we claim again your invitation to have our time, talent, and treasure orchestrated into your plan from before all ages. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

### SCRIPTURE READING (Romans 3:19-31)

*Now all the words of the law are addressed, as we know, to those who are under the law, so that no one may have anything to say in self-defense, and the whole world may be exposed to God's judgment. For no human being can be justified in the sight of God by keeping the law: law brings only the consciousness of sin.*

*But now, quite independently of law, though with the law and the prophets bearing witness to it, the righteousness of God has been made known; it is effective through faith in Christ for all who have such faith – all, without distinction. For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine glory; and all are justified by God's free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus. For God designed him to be the means of expiating sin by his death, effective through faith. God meant by this to demonstrate his justice,*

*because in his forbearance he had overlooked the sins of the past – to demonstrate his justice now in the present, showing that he is himself just and also justifies anyone who puts his faith in Jesus.*

*What room then is left for human pride? It is excluded. And on what principle? The keeping of the law would not exclude it, but faith does. For our argument is that people are justified by faith quite apart from any question of keeping the law.*

*Do you suppose God is the God of the Jews alone? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Certainly, of Gentiles also. For if the Lord is indeed one, he will justify the circumcised by their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine the law? By no means: we are upholding the law.*

## THE SOURCE OF THE LAW

The rules are for the uninitiated. They serve as the starting point for our practice in obedience. Learning to live by general rules can hit two birds with one stone. It can teach us how to follow with devotion while also cultivating the sort of hunger and dissatisfaction the Spirit uses to open us to His specific commandments for our daily lives.

The Holy Spirit has an absolute commandment for every relative situation. Relativism is something God can use to point us to the absurdity of following in all circumstances anything or anyone less than a Living Truth. Lots of people who cling to this absurdity think they are clinging to God. But every idol wears the same mask.

There are three major stages: living by the law, lawlessness, and living by the Spirit. How did Paul somehow uphold the law while being justified apart from it? By saying yes to the Spirit who, as the source of the covenant given to Israel, offered to intimately instruct Paul himself as well as everyone who receives Him.

These stages are not cut-and-dried, and people do not neatly fit into one of these categories. All of them – lawlessness, the law, and life by the Spirit – tend to operate to some degree in some aspect of a relationship. Whenever someone comes out of a period of following too many general rules for specific situations, they tend to require a period of lawlessness – of doing and thinking whatever they want – to truly start living by the Spirit. But living by the Spirit provides a more lasting freedom than lawlessness, even as it involves more particular opportunities for obedience than the law.

The New Covenant is not the abrogation but the consummation of the Old. Appreciation for the New can quickly dwindle without some prior restlessness with following general rules or with doing whatever we want. When I lived in North Carolina, I once overheard someone ask, “Why didn’t God just begin with Jesus and the New Covenant?” as though the entire story of Israel and God’s patterns of relating to her people were a waste of time. But as Paul wrote in Romans, gratitude for forgiveness does not come before consciousness of sin.

God continues to relate to every person who is in the Old Covenant in some or every area of their lives just as God continues to relate to and watch and work for the well-being of those who are in a period of lawlessness. So what is the motivation for entering the

New Covenant? The motivation comes from a heavenly desire to receive the Spirit's love for the community of Israel upon ourselves as individuals in covenant with others who want the same thing. And we are ready when we are no longer content with anything – including the law – to come between us and the Spirit.

When Paul talks in this passage about God justifying us, he implies that God makes righteous anyone who puts their trust in Jesus. The primary responsibility for – and the source of – our acceptability has shifted away from us and away from other people ... to God. No more righteousness by right behavior or right thinking. No more righteousness by right self-image or right practice per se. Leaving behind every attempt and intention to make ourselves righteous, the sincerity of God's love for us – and our reception of it – is our acceptability.

In other words, the New Covenant is the stage in human spiritual development where we stop trying to impress God and just let ourselves be loved, so that God's energy rather than our own becomes the fundamental source of everything we do and say. We are no longer trying to woo God. We are letting God woo us. This begins when we recognize that the nature of God's love for us does not waver depending on our successes and our failures, our accomplishments and our mistakes. Out of all the loves that have come into the world, God's love is the only one that does not change.

It is relational in that our obedience and humility to Jesus can bring us deeper into what has always been waiting for us. It is there for us as often as we need it, and it remains there waiting when we think we do not. God will never go away before we send Him away. God will never let go of us in His heart even if we let go of His hand. And through His Son, He has with utter and complete vulnerability revealed who He is: that He is more than anything like a person who would rather die for us than let us go on living without knowing Him personally. And it is because God first loved us through Jesus in this way that we can claim the strength to live a new life.

This all probably sounds obvious to many of you, but we get the opposite message everywhere we look. The world wars against this revelation of God's heart in subtle ways. The worst gossip in the world is gossip about God. Gossip keeps others from growing their own relationship with the people we talk about, because we cause them

to settle for what we say about them. Jesus came to offer us everything we need in order to have our own relationship with God through Him. His word about God is the primary one we should settle for. His act of liberation is different from what God did through Moses for the Hebrews in Egypt. God's act of liberation through Jesus reveals that both oppressor and oppressed are enslaved. There is not a person on earth who does not need God to experience freedom. We are every one of us dealing with a kind of slavery that, from behind the tantalizing appearances of freedom apart from God, seeks to capture us.

What God did through Moses for the Hebrews and what God has done for all through Jesus were both physical and spiritual acts of liberation. Getting rescued from physical slavery does wonders for the spirit. And getting rescued from spiritual slavery does wonders for the body. One is not less real than the other.

The rules are for the uninitiated, but we have to start somewhere. Every stage – doing what we should do, doing whatever we want, and doing what the Spirit wants – comes into better focus as we grow.

The problem is that humanity suffers from arrested development. We do not easily move on from where we have been when we have been there a long time. We do not easily discern when God wants to begin a new part of His plan for us while the current part of the plan is still operating. I can remember when one of my first mothers in the faith approached me with confidence that God wanted me to be a minister, but I was still attached to the part of God's plan where I could prepare for my vocatio without knowing the big picture.

Looking back, I can see many occasions when God was ready to shift purposes and environments for me, but I still believed I had more to learn where I was. Transferring from Wake Forest to Fuller was one of these occasions. Even though there was more to learn at Wake, I see now that it was not anything I needed to know more than I needed to leave there. I was raised in a liberal mainline environment most of my life. Their gifts are ingrained in me, and I am probably too willing to overlook their foibles. Fuller is an entirely different world, but hopefully I am becoming more appreciative of their gifts and less judgmental of their weaknesses.

For eighteen years, the members of a Congregational church in Maine planted seeds of faith in me. My favorite teacher worked out her vocatio at a Catholic elementary school. I attended an Anabaptist

college that helped me travel to the Middle East, where I saw the Jordan River and Mount Nebo. I have a favorite Uncle who is Episcopalian and another favorite who is Presbyterian. I once ate Ben & Jerry's ice cream with a Benedictine monk. My formal training for ministry began at a progressive Baptist seminary in the almost Deep South. And I am now a seminarian from the UCC, studying at an evangelical seminary.

In the midst of these apparent contradictions, God has let me see the underlying unity of Christ's church. However suppressed and misrepresented it may be in this world, the unity comes into focus where the limelight fades away. And God has used it all – the highs and the lows and everything in between – to sink into me how rare yet necessary a gift it is to be part of the faith family at this church, online and in person.

If humanity ever allows Jesus to heal us and move us on from the areas in our development where we have been arrested, we will be attacked from the other direction. We will be tempted to settle for *artificially induced* development – the idea that we are further along the Way than we really are. This is my greatest temptation lately. I have never been around as many mature Christians as I have been at this church. I am not thinking about age, but spiritual maturity. I love it because I love being in relationship with people who challenge me to grow up into Christ and who by their presence and deeds remind me every day that I am accountable to His Spirit. But sometimes I forget that no matter how much I may want to, I cannot get to where you are myself without going through something like what you have been through.

Most of the adults in my old life were in a hurry to get me adjusted to the real world. I am sure it is much harder to resist doing this with your biological children than it is with your children in the faith. But something within me told me that the real world was not real – it was not how life was meant to be lived. To resist this “real” world, I wasted a lot of time in an equally unreal world before I woke up to how God's grace works within and invades them both. And when I am around each of you, I am reminded every day that the dream world and the real world – doing whatever I want and doing what I should do – pale in comparison to doing what the Spirit wants, and to the gospel and the life the Spirit can make out of nothing.

Sometimes I need to slow down and remember that I can only grow as fast as God's grace enables me to grow. I have One who goes before me into eternity, and my only hope for authentic growth is to follow Him into His surprises for me. I began to enjoy God's surprises when I began to hate control, both having control over my own life and other people having control over my life apart from God. I cannot myself navigate any lasting option between arrested and induced development. I cannot myself discern when to run toward the finish line and when to hide under the shadow of His wings. All I can do is claim every grace He would have for me, to do His will and to serve His children with abandon. For I have known the unreality of the opposites we face in this world, and He has shown me a way through them.

#### PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Beloved Father, no storm is stronger than you who are our anchor. You get no glory from an easy life. You get no glory from sails set against the gusts of your wind. All that we seek is nothing compared to the adventures you would have for us to come alive. No, you receive glory when we continue to follow you whatever the adversity. You receive glory when we praise your goodness in the midst of evil. And we could do none of this had your Son Jesus not taught us to pray, saying, *"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."*

#### BENEDICTION (Psalm 20:1-2)

*May the Lord answer you in time of trouble.  
May the name of Jacob's God be your tower of strength.  
May he send you help from the sanctuary,  
And give you support from Zion.  
Amen.*