

Romans

Bible Study

But Now

Romans 3:21—23

The significance of Paul's use of the term "but now" cannot be overemphasized. This phrase is bookended by "times past" and "ages to come" in Ephesians 2:7—11) and describe different ages with dispensational distinctions. When studying the meaning of various Bible passages, it is important to understand which dispensational age is being spoken about. Those who lump dispensational ages into one big mass will have a very warped view of Scripture. Paul sprinkles the term "but now" throughout his writings to refer to this Dispensation of Grace from other ages (Romans 3:1; 7:6; 16:26; 1 Corinthians 12:18—20; Ephesians 2:13; Colossians 1:26). This change happened in the middle of the book of Acts, which is why he speaks about it in both his earlier and later writings. This dispensational change began after the stoning of Stephen when Paul became saved.

Paul was saved after hearing the gospel message. The only gospel message being proclaimed at that time was the Gospel of the Kingdom. Israel needed to understand that Jesus Christ was their Messiah, and this is what Paul came to believe. However, God also told Paul that He had a special purpose and mission for him. He was set apart to reach all men (not just the Jewish nation) with what he had seen and heard (Acts 22:15). Paul's earlier and later writings show continuity in his message, and a change from what Jesus and His Disciples were preaching. He was the first one into the Body of Christ and therefore was set apart as a pattern for all those who would follow after him (1 Timothy 1:16).

Righteousness apart from the Law (verse 21)

In times past, under the Dispensation of Law, Israel was required to obey the Mosaic Law. By doing this, Israel could be declared righteous, but unfortunately, that was humanly impossible. When they did break the Law, God built into the Law remediation, giving Israel instructions as to how to deal with breaking the Law. What the Law was really showing is that it was impossible to perfectly follow the Law, and that they needed someone to save them from their failure to do so.

Looking at how God dealt with Israel in times past gives historical perspective and a point of comparison with what God requires today. This is why Paul contrasts the times past with the but now. Instead of God requiring us to follow the Mosaic Law for our righteousness, he is about to introduce a dispensational change of obtaining God's righteousness apart from the Law. This idea is a grand departure from everything God taught to Israel. The life of every Israelite revolved around the God-given Law. For them, giving up the Law would be like us giving up Paul's writings. The Law defined every aspect of Israel's life. It's through the Law that God revealed exactly what He expected. Now God, through the Apostle Paul, was setting the Law aside for the Gentiles, and he is going to tell us how we can be declared righteous outside of the Law. According to Romans 1:16—17 the righteousness of God is now revealed through this new Gospel of Christ (also called the Gospel of the Grace of God in Acts 20:24 and "my" gospel throughout his epistles). This Gospel of Grace was not preached until it was revealed to Paul, probably during the time he was down in Arabia shortly after his conversion (Galatians 1:11—20).

The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, penned by Moses, was written specifically to Israel and is closely connected to the future Millennial Kingdom. Notice how Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are promised a place in the Kingdom, along with other believing Israelites in Matthew 8:11. The Kingdom of Heaven is not heaven, but a heavenly government brought to earth with Christ as King, as shown in Luke 13:29. The Law will always have a place within the nation of Israel. If the Law is abrogated, then we know that God is not working with Israel as a nation.

Since God is no longer dealing with the nation of Israel, we in the Body of Christ are not being held to obey the ordinances of the Law. For us, Christ has completely fulfilled the Law, and since we have been baptized

into Christ we are fully identified with Him, and we thus have also fulfilled the Law. We are not under Law, we are under Grace (Romans 6:14).

Notice, however, that there is still a group following the Law in Jerusalem (Acts 21). They were careful to keep the Mosaic Law, as any believing Jew was required to do, even after Paul declared that believers were not under Law. They were either living in a state of sin by disobeying Paul's revelation, or they were doing exactly what they were supposed to do. I believe they were correct in following the Law. These Jews had believed in the Gospel of the Kingdom, and were looking forward to the coming of their Messiah to set up the promised Kingdom. They were required to obey the Law by celebrating the feast days and bringing sacrifices to the temple, etc. They were never told to put the Law aside. These Kingdom believers in Jerusalem were doing what they were required to do.

This can be held in contrast to those saved under the Gospel of Grace as preached by the Apostle Paul. The Council at Jerusalem was a meeting between the Hebrew church in Jerusalem (preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom) and Paul (Acts 15). They determined, by the Holy Spirit, (Ephesians 3:5) that those saved by Paul's gospel were not mandated to keep the Law, as were those who were saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom (Galatians 2:6—9). Under Paul's Gospel, God was not dealing with Israel as a nation, but with individuals. These believers in Jerusalem would eventually be told to put the Law aside and meet Christ outside the gates (Hebrews 13:12—13). This does not mean that they were brought into the Body of Christ, only that they were to put the Law aside. I believe this was to prepare them for the destruction of the temple. Once the temple is destroyed, it would be impossible to follow the Law and they were being prepared for that change.

Once the Rapture takes place, closing out this dispensation of Grace, God will reinstitute a new Law (new covenant) and cause believing Israel to be able to perfectly obey it, unlike they did with the Mosaic Law (Jeremiah 31:31—34). Obedience of this Law is pictured in Zechariah 14:16—19; Ezekiel 44:15—27; Isaiah 2:2—3. When this new Law is put in effect, God will once again be dealing with Israel as a nation.

The very fact that Paul says that we are not under Law is a very strong indication that there was a dispensational change (Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:23). When God was dealing with Israel as a nation under the Gospel of the Kingdom, believing Jews were still obligated to obey the Law (Acts 21:20), at least until they were told to put the Law aside. In contrast to these kingdom believers, the grace believers were never obligated to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3), or to follow the Law (Galatians 2:15—21). This dispensational change did not happen at Acts 2, because we see them still following the Mosaic Law. It could not have happened at the end of Acts since Paul tells us at least 20 years before the end of Acts that we are not under Law. I believe this dispensational change came with the conversion of the Apostle Paul in Acts 9.

Witnessed by the Law and prophets (verse 21—23)

If this new dispensation had already begun, why is Paul bringing up the Law and the prophets and relating them to God's righteousness? It actually sounds like a continuation of the preaching of the Kingdom. The best way to understand this is to understand that there are a number of common elements between what Jesus and His Disciples were preaching and what Paul was preaching. The main connection is Jesus Christ. His death, burial and resurrection were as important to Israel, when God was dealing with them as a nation, as it is to us today in the Body of Christ. The Law and Prophets proclaim that Jesus Christ would come as Savior, and salvation comes through faith for any person in any dispensation. That Paul is showing what Jesus Christ accomplished on the Cross affects all mankind is made evident in the next verse, Romans 3:23—For all have sinned. If all have sinned, then all need a Savior.

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