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ANSWERING: NO ONE SHOULD KEEP THE LAW

Pastor: No one is able to keep the Law. Hebrews 7:18-19 tells us that the Law was set aside because of its weakness, because the Law made nothing perfect. As a matter of fact, the power of sin is in trying to keep the Law (1 Corinthians 15:56). This is why Paul said that the Law was given so that transgression might increase (Romans 5:20). Sin takes opportunity through the commandments and becomes alive by increasing the desires to break them (Romans 7:8-9).

“No one is able to keep the Law.”

When the pastor claims that “No one is able to keep the Law,” what is this intended to mean? Is this remark at all made to want to discourage people *from obeying God*? When people slip up and falter, failing to fully obey the Lord, do they then not make any effort or even attempt to obey Him at all—precisely because they know there is a possibility they may fall? Today’s Messianic Believers are often told that since as imperfect human beings with a sin nature we cannot perfectly obey the Torah, then we should not really try to keep it at all. Yet, those who have turned to Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) for salvation have done so precisely because they know that they have mortal limitations, and that they need His sacrifice covering their transgressions.

It is quite flawed, as well as morally dangerous, to suggest that since people are likely unable to follow all of the commandments, and that they will err sometimes—that trying to obey God’s Law is a less-than-worthy endeavor. Paul’s words of 1 Corinthians 15:34 immediately come into my mind: “Become sober-minded as you ought, and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak *this* to your shame.” *Outsiders to the faith need to see the faithful faithfully obey.* But a pastor trying to justify disobedience via the guise of “we are not able to keep the Law” is something that he is likely to answer for before the King of Kings (cf. Matthew 7:22-23; 13:41).

It is very true that the Lord calls our human righteousness “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6), and that in our own limited strength we can do very little that will please Him. **Seeking salvation in regard to “Torah observance” is most vain.** There are some people out there in today’s Messianic movement, who you will encounter, who really do believe that they have acquired salvation precisely because they are “Torah observant.” But the Scriptures say that our human works cannot earn salvation (Ephesians 2:9; 2 Timothy 1:9).

At the very same time, while salvation is freely given by God to those who cry out in confession and repentance, good works are absolutely required of His people (Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:18; Titus 2:14; 3:8). Such good works include an imperative obedience to God’s commandments, commandments which are to guide a life of holiness unto Him. It can be difficult for some Believers, but we each must have a balanced approach to recognizing that while salvation is a free gift of God, our Creator expects His people to

do what is right via tangible actions of faith. This most especially includes works of love and mercy, as James the half-brother of Yeshua explains, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Not being able to perfectly obey God’s Torah or Law, as human beings, is not at all substantial justification to completely ignore it, expelling no effort in maturity to conform a man or woman’s will to His will. If we can recognize that sin is disobedience to the Torah (1 John 3:4), and that born again Believers have been cleared of the penalties due them by God’s grace in the Messiah—do we really think we have some kind of “permission” to violate God’s Law, which once condemned us as unredeemed sinners?

The Apostle Paul strongly asserts in Romans 3:31, “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.” He admonishes Messiah followers that simply because they might have faith in Him, and that His completed work for is where redemption is to be found (Romans 3:22-24), such Believers do not “overthrow the law” (RSV). The Greek verb *histēmi* (ἵστημι), rendered as either “establish” or “uphold” (RSV/NIV), means “**to validate someth. that is in force or in practice, reinforce validity of, uphold, maintain, validate**” (BDAG).¹ In our walk of trust as Believers, we are all required to uphold the validity of God’s Torah for our lives, being empowered by His Holy Spirit, following Yeshua’s example and interpretation of the Torah—thus being enabled to fulfill His tasks in the Earth. And lest we forget, much of this relates to how we can better understand and implement those key commandments of loving God and neighbor.²

In our human frailties, it is true that we cannot perfectly live up to God’s high and holy standard. But this does not mean that we ignore God’s Torah, fail to read and study and mediate upon it, and that we should not strive for proper living—as some pastors and teachers may actually think that *being ignorant of it all* is best. Rather, we should recognize our shortcomings and do the best we can as we grow in sanctification, asking God for forgiveness when we fall (1 John 1:9). We need to seek conformity with His Word, and recognize that His grace and mercy are always there to cover us when we fall. **We must seek to grow in our faith with a refined and comprehensive obedience**, not remaining in immaturity.

“Hebrews 7:18-19 tells us that the Law was set aside because of its weakness, because the Law made nothing perfect.”

The pastor’s reference of Hebrews 7:18-19 is likely made off-hand, because nothing is stated in these two verses about the Torah being set aside. Hebrews 7:18-19 reads, “For on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.” Does this verse indeed imply that God’s Torah was weak and that it was useless? It certainly does not when we place this passage in its appropriate context, notably as the author of Hebrews is specific in that “a former commandment is set aside” (RSV). At most, this involves an aspect of the Law and not the Law as a whole.

The overall subject matter of Hebrews ch. 7 compares and contrasts the Levitical priesthood with the Melchizedekian priesthood in which the Messiah Yeshua serves. While the Levitical priesthood is to surely be honored and respected, it is only Yeshua’s priesthood which has provided for a permanent solution to the human sin problem. Most importantly, such a Melchizedekian priesthood is older and was in place before that of Levi (Hebrews 7:1-10). With Yeshua serving as High Priest in Heaven, before the Father, some kind of an allowance or change in the Torah has to be made to accommodate this (Hebrews 7:11-19). The Levitical priests were human sinners and limited mortals (Hebrews 7:23, 27-28), unlike the Son of God who is perfect and who

¹ BDAG, 482.

² Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

requires no successor (Hebrews 7:20-22, 24-26). Yeshua “is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). His single sacrifice on behalf of sinful humanity provides a permanent atonement that the animal sacrifices of the Tanach could not offer:

“[He] does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:27-28).

The Levitical priests who served in the Ancient Tabernacle and Temple have surely been important figures in God’s service. But, such priests were also weak human men with a fallen sin nature, whereas Yeshua the Messiah is sinless and blameless as God Incarnate. Yeshua’s priestly service in Heaven, after the order of Melchizedek, offers a continual intercession—whereas the high priest was only permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies once a year (Hebrews 9:25). Because of this, the author of Hebrews is able to write, “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also” (Hebrews 7:12). Such “a change of law” or *nomou metathesis* (νόμου μετάθεσις) is something targeted and involves “an alteration of the Law regarding priesthood” (Phillips New Testament), and with it any changes directly brought about by Yeshua’s death and resurrection (cf. Colossians 2:14).

The CJB/CJSB actually renders *nomou metathesis* as “a transformation of *Torah*,” which is intended to convey that a widescale dismissal of the Torah’s commandments is not at all implied by Hebrews 7:12. Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern states in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, that “no change or transformation in *Torah* is envisioned other than in connection with the priesthood and sacrificial system. The term ‘*metathesis*’ implies retention of the basic structure of *Torah*, with some of its elements rearranged (‘transformed’); it does not imply abrogation of either the *Torah* as a whole or of *mitzvot* [commandments] not connected with the priesthood and the sacrificial system.”³ One cannot use Hebrews 7:12 and the “change in law” to cast aside the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, the appointed times, or kosher dietary laws—*much less* any of the Torah’s commandments regulating human ethics and morality. One can use Hebrews 7:12 to argue that the “change in law,” required by Yeshua’s priesthood, involves the capital penalties of the Torah being remitted by His sacrifice at Golgotha (Calvary).

The understanding that the Torah has been “transformed” by Yeshua’s priestly service (Hebrews 7:12) would fit from definitions we see of the Greek verb *metatithēmi* (μετατίθημι). *BDAG* offers two main definitions for it, including “**to convey from one place to another, put in another place, transfer**” and “**to effect a change in state or condition, change, alter.**”⁴ This would support an internal rearrangement of Torah commandments necessitated by the inauguration of Yeshua’s priesthood, but not a total abrogation and elimination of the Law of Moses. In the view of Paul Ellingworth, *metathesis* should be “understood neutrally” and not as a “‘removal’ of law altogether.” The “change of law” then, that Yeshua has brought about, does regard “the entire legal system, [but] understood as essentially cultic. The change of law introduces, not a state of lawlessness, but an order which imposes stricter obligations, and thus stricter penalties (10:28f).”⁵ Surely if one disregards Moses’ Teaching severe consequences will ensue, so disregarding Israel’s Messiah and His priestly work is even more damning (Hebrews 10:28-29).

Things have changed since the Messiah’s arrival onto the scene of human history, but this does not mean that the Torah’s commandments are now all null-and-void. The internal change to the Torah has occurred precisely because Yeshua has provided the final sacrifice for sin, and the considerable bulk of

³ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 681.

⁴ *BDAG*, 642.

⁵ Paul Ellingworth, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 374.

“transformation of *Torah*” (Hebrews 7:12, CJB/CJSB) regards the Tabernacle/Temple service. The significance of disregarding the Torah’s instructions, as they define how God’s people live individually and corporately in holiness, is still very much present (Matthew 5:19). It is intensified especially by the fact that within Hebrews the Jeremiah 31:31-34 promise of the New Covenant is referenced twice (Hebrews 8:8-13; 10:16-17)—something realized in the lives of the redeemed *precisely because* of Yeshua’s priesthood (cf. Hebrews 8:7, Grk.)

Recognizing that the Torah has gone through a phase of transformation on account of both the Messiah’s sacrificial work and His current priestly service in Heaven, it should not be too difficult to understand why Hebrews 7:18 says, “there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness.” This “setting aside” or *athetesis* (ἀθέτησις), “**the process of causing someth. to be set aside**” (BDAG),⁶ does not involve the Torah as a whole somehow being abolished, but rather the “former regulation” (NIV) or *proagousēs entolēs* (προαγούσης ἐντολῆς) of the Levitical priesthood being removed to the side, likely until Yeshua returns and the Temple service is restored in the Millennium with Him present (cf. Ezekiel chs. 44-48). Ellingworth confirms, “Here the context suggests ἐντολή [*entolē*] a particular command...but since no individual [OT] text is cited, it is probably better to think of the legislation establishing the Aaronic priesthood and its function.”⁷ The very reason why this specific Torah instruction can be considered as “weak and ineffectual” (NRSV) is because “the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak” (Hebrews 7:28)—which is a human problem—not because God’s instruction on the priesthood is somehow bad.

Continuing with Hebrews 7:19, some who do not read carefully can get the impression that God’s Torah was the problem: “(for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.” The statement that gets many people tripped up is “the law brought nothing to perfection” (REB), *ouden gar eteleiōsen ho nomos* (οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐτελείωσεν ὁ νόμος). The verb of interest here is *teleiōō* (τελειόω), “of persons, to bring one to perfection” (LS).⁸ This should not be too difficult to figure out, though: the Torah is **completely incapable of providing eternal redemption for someone**, because its principal purpose is to define sin. The Torah is God’s Word, and it is surely Divine, inspired, and useful for instruction (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16). Yet it is only in Yeshua the Messiah where true perfection can be attained. F.F. Bruce is entirely right to assert in his Hebrews commentary, “the gospel...has opened up a way of free access to God,” being a “perfection which the law could never bring about.”⁹

A related verb to *teleiōō* (τελειόω), *teleō* (τελέω),¹⁰ appears in one of the most important parts of the Holy Scriptures. At the moment of Yeshua’s death, He cries out to the Father, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The source text is actually *tetelestai* (τετέλεσται), and within the realm of lexical possibilities John 19:30 can be rendered with “It is accomplished!” (CJB/CJSB) or “It has been brought to the goal!” To argue that “It is finished!” somehow pertains to a declaration made nullifying the Mosaic Torah is quite out of place, as Yeshua’s words **concern atonement of sins and the reconciliation with God that His sacrifice offers all people**. When Hebrews 7:19a says that “the Law made nothing perfect,” the issue is the fact that such perfection is *only attainable* in the Messiah of Israel; it is not a claim that the Torah is somehow not *tamim* (תָּמִים);

⁶ BDAG, 24.

⁷ Ellingworth, 381.

He does further conclude, unfortunately like many interpreters, “This is for our author the heart of the νόμος [*nomos*], and is not sharply distinguished from it here.”

⁸ LS, 797.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp 169, 170.

¹⁰ LS, 799 says “like τελειόω” it means “to make perfect, i.e. to initiate in the mysteries.”

Psalm 19:7) or is to be unvalued by God's people, because the author of Hebrews *never* says "the Law is not perfect."¹¹ Donald Guthrie validly comments,

"There is no doubt that the writer does not here mean that the law itself is annulled, but that it can be discounted as a means of gaining perfection...It is characteristic of law—not merely the Mosaic law, but all law—that it has made nothing *perfect*. All it could do was focus on imperfection. Indeed the Mosaic law went further and demonstrated in its application that perfection was impossible."¹²

The Torah itself does not have the power to bring anyone to spiritual perfection. This is because eternal salvation, communion with God, is not and has never been available in the commandments of the Torah. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart are proper to emphasize "that nowhere in the Old Testament is it suggested that anyone was saved by keeping the Law,"¹³ especially since much of the testimony of the Tanach is that Ancient Israel *frequently disobeyed*. Because the Torah is God's high and holy standard which defines sin and what He considers acceptable and unacceptable, it is to show people their innate need for a Savior who Himself provides righteousness (cf. Romans 10:4, Grk). While pointing to the Redeemer, the Torah itself cannot be our Redeemer. Hebrews 7:19b testifies to this reality: "there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God." This Hope can be none other than the Messiah Himself. The author of Hebrews notes that His priestly service is one that is permanent, and that it will exist forever:

"THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER" [Psalm 110:4]...The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, but Yeshua, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently" (Hebrews 7:21, 23-24).

In reviewing Hebrews ch. 7 and the subject matter in view, the Torah *as a whole* has not been "annulled" or "abolished" or even "set aside." The changes that the Law has experienced per Yeshua's entry onto the scene relate to a change in priesthood from that of Levi to Melchizedek; God's holiness code has surely not been rescinded. Stern is right to conclude for us, "Yeshua by himself has an everlasting priesthood by **the power of an indestructible life**...This sets aside the need for a system of passing on the priesthood from generation to generation."¹⁴ Still, even with a change in priesthood, God's Torah contains foundational ethical, moral, and life-guiding principles that all Believers *should*—and most evangelical Protestants who I know and respect at least claim to—uphold. It includes important accounts and histories we are to hear and learn from. Most importantly, the Torah defines how God's people are to be identified in the world as those called out to holiness.

Why are there some "Bible Believers" out there who oppose the study and observance of the Torah? Have they not allowed the Torah to reveal the sin in their lives, and point them to the perfection only available in the Messiah? Could many simply be afraid to alter some of their religious practices that might not be based upon Scripture, but rather in questionable traditions that need some reevaluation (i.e., Christmas and Easter)?¹⁵ Are people afraid of getting out of their comfort zones, and are they concerned about what some others might think when they say they are keeping the Law? We may never know all the answers, but the pastor's conclusion that God's Torah as a whole was set aside in Hebrews 7:18-19 is most incorrect.¹⁶

¹¹ "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7).

The LXX notably renders *tamim* or "perfect" as *amōmos* (ἀμωμος), meaning "faultless" (NETS).

¹² Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 164.

¹³ Fee and Stuart, 169.

¹⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 681.

¹⁵ Consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper* and *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

¹⁶ For a more detailed examination of Hebrews 7:18-19 and the surrounding text, consult the author's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

“As a matter of fact, the power of sin is in trying to keep the Law (1 Corinthians 15:56).”

What does the pastor really hope to achieve in claiming that “the power of sin is in trying to keep the Law”? By making such a remark, could he actually be trying to tell someone that attempting to follow God’s commandments is really sin? The only way we can actually know what 1 Corinthians 15:56 says is by examining it: “The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law.” Interestingly enough, it appears in a wider series of statements delivered by the Apostle Paul about the resurrection, and how the force of death will one day be defeated (1 Corinthians 15:50-58; cf. Isaiah 25:8).¹⁷

Paul’s remark in 1 Corinthians 15:56 is usually associated with Romans 5:12-21 and Romans 7:7-12, and the ability of the Torah or Law of Moses to most definitely define, identify, and condemn sin.¹⁸ Challenges erupt when some of the statements or conclusions of various interpreters are then catalogued, which more often than not are negative toward the post-resurrection era validity of the Torah for God’s people.

David Prior states, “Death...sin...the law—all have been broken wide open in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even now we can experience victory over this trio...”¹⁹ David E. Garland similarly says, “Christ’s death and resurrection signify that Christians are delivered from the fallen world under the tyranny of the triumvirate of sin, law, and death...”²⁰ Suffice it to say, God’s Torah can actually be viewed as being an enemy to be defeated, to be listed right alongside the power of sin and the power of death.

To what extent is the problem with God’s Torah? *Is God’s Torah really an enemy to be defeated?* How should readers approach the statement *hē de dunamis tēs hamartias ho nomos* (ἡ δὲ δύναμις τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ νόμος), which Messianic versions tend to render along the lines of “sin draws its power from the *Torah*” (1 Corinthians 15:56, CJB/CJSB) or “the power of sin is the *Torah*” (TLV)?

We cannot forget how sin is Biblically defined as lawlessness or a transgression of God’s commandments (1 John 3:4). Sin does not gain its power directly from the Torah, as though God’s Law were somehow “sinful,” but rather through human disobedience to it. **Obeying the Torah can by no means be considered a “sin” or “sinful.”**

Many of today’s Christians draw the conclusion from 1 Corinthians 15:56 that if one tries to keep God’s Torah, it will only cause someone to sin, and so it is probably not too helpful that a person really try to keep its commandments. This is a very improper approach to the Law. While disobedience to the Torah is sin, and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), such disobedience and its commensurate penalties should precisely *cause us to cry out for the eternal salvation* provided in Messiah Yeshua! Following the salvation experience, we are to endeavor to *sin no more*, and we are by no means permitted to use our being cleared of transgression as a way to self-justify various ungodly activities, attitudes, ideas, or habits.

With the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit as born again Believers commit themselves to a regular study of God’s Word—which especially includes Moses’ Teaching—we become much more consciously aware of the various sins and errors that we have committed in our lives. Those who love God and are recipients of His bountiful mercy and grace, naturally do not want to displease Him by violating His commandments. Those who follow God’s Law—especially recognizing that it is to be supernaturally written onto the heart by the promise of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—are to do so *naturally* out of the gratitude they have for Him sending His Son to atone for our sins. Such an obedience is to come by the power of the

¹⁷ Consult the author’s article “The Certainty of the Resurrection” (forthcoming).

¹⁸ This section includes adapted commentary from *1 Corinthians for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁹ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 276.

²⁰ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 746.

Holy Spirit, as Believers grow and mature in faith. We are not forgiven of breaking the Law by receiving the Messiah into our lives, to only be “released” and willfully violate the very things that we were forgiven of.

The Psalmist declares to the Lord, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law” (Psalm 119:18), and “I long for Your salvation, O LORD, and Your law is my delight” (Psalm 119:74). In this second verse we do not see any sharp distinction made between *yeshuatekha* (ישועתך) and *toratekha sha’ashu’ai* (תורתך שעשעי). God’s salvation and God’s Torah are not polar opposites, but it is only once people have experienced God’s salvation provided in the Messiah Yeshua, that they can truly be holy by a consistent obedience to His Instruction.

So what does Paul actually communicate in 1 Corinthians 15:56, “the strength of sin is the law” (KJV)? In his 1 Corinthians commentary, Leon Morris draws the conclusion,

“[S]in has an unexpected ally and source of power, *the law*. *The law* is of divine origin, and Paul can speak of the commandment as ‘holy, righteous and good’ (Rom. 7:12). But it is quite unable to bring people to salvation (*cf.* Rom. 5:12ff.; 7:7ff.; 10:4). Indeed, by setting before us the standard we ought to reach and never do, it becomes sin’s stronghold. It makes sinners of us all. It condemns us all.”²¹

Morris is, of course, correct in emphasizing that salvation cannot be found in the Torah, and that it sets before people God’s definite standard of sin. The fact that the Torah condemns sinners as lawbreakers cannot be disputed. But whether or not “sin’s stronghold” is actually found in God’s Law should be questioned, because “sin’s stronghold” is actually going to be found within the rebellious heart and wicked mind of a person unwilling to obey Him. The venue in which one commits sin is not provided by the Torah; the safe place from which to *flee from sin* is provided by following the Torah.

What is really meant by Paul’s assertion *hē de dunamis tēs hamartias ho nomos*? The Greek word *dunamis* (δύναμις), used in 1 Corinthians 15:56, does usually mean “power,” akin to “power, might, strength” (LS).²² God’s Torah, which is inherently not sinful, is by no means what *empowers* people to sin. It is extremely important for us to take notice of how an alternative definition for *dunamis*, noted by LS, is that in the works of Plato it can be “the force or meaning of a word.”²³ A further application of *dunamis* is simply, “meaning, significance” (CGEDNT).²⁴

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 14:11, the NASU actually translates *dunamis* as “meaning”: “If then I do not know the meaning of the language [*tēn dunamin tēs phōnēs*, τὴν δύναμιν τῆς φωνῆς; the meaning of a sound, NRSV], I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.” This appears within instruction that Paul delivers about the significance of the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 14:1-19), and how those who hear whatever is said need to be able to understand it. Fee notes that the classical definition of *dunamis* as “meaning” fits best here, although he concludes it is “Used only here in the NT in this sense.”²⁵ But, only a chapter later in 1 Corinthians 15:56, *dunamis* could very well have been used again with the exact same intent.

Dunamis as “meaning” in 1 Corinthians 15:56 makes appropriate sense in light of sin being defined by God’s Torah. The “meaning” or *dunamis* of sin is provided in the Torah. A possible translation of 1 Corinthians 15:56, reflecting this interpretation, can be “The sting of death is sin, and the meaning of sin is *in* the Torah [Law]” (PME), a rendering which would be in closer alignment with 1 John 3:4 and its assertion that “sin is lawlessness.” Sin can only be practiced in the hearts and minds of those who break God’s Law, not by those who truly strive to obey it. Paul speaks of the transgressor who has to acknowledge, “For we know that the

²¹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp 229-230.

²² LS, 213.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ CGEDNT, 49.

²⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 665 fn#39.

Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin” (Romans 7:14). God’s Torah is of the realm of the Spirit, but sin is of the realm of fallen human flesh.

In asserting that “The sting of death is sin, and the [*dunamis*] of sin is the law” (1 Corinthians 15:56), it is to be correctly acknowledged that God’s Torah defines and reveals sin, demonstrating the gravity of it. God’s Torah is hardly an enemy to be defeated, especially as it will be taught from Jerusalem to the whole world in the Millennial Kingdom (Micah 4:1-4; Isaiah 2:2-4).²⁶ But, God’s Torah is hardly the decisive answer to the sin and death problem, as it only reveals the meaning of why sin and death, and the associated disobedience and rebellion to God, are such a problem. **Only Yeshua the Messiah is the decisive answer to the sin and death problem**, with not just permanent forgiveness available in Him, but the assurance of an entry into a grand future in the Kingdom of God and New Creation (1 Corinthians 15:50).

“This is why Paul said that the Law was given so that transgression might increase (Romans 5:20).”

Our pastor’s intention is to try to castigate God’s Torah as largely being a negative force in history, something that was not only intended to be in force *only* for Ancient Israel, but also as something that could *only* multiply the intensity of sin. The dilemma in history, prior to the formal codification of *torah* (תּוֹרָה) at Mount Sinai, is that other than various figures like Abraham learning instructions via their relationship with God (cf. Genesis 25:6), there was no definitive series of commandments in place that would constitute His standard. The Apostle Paul had to observe, “for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Romans 5:13). He says that “sin is not taken into account when there is no law” (NIV), meaning that in the time of human history before the Sinai theophany—people might have gotten by with doing things in the sight of God, without any definite penalties, that later generations would not.

The very reason why the Lord delivered the Ancient Israelites from Egypt, and led them to His mountain, was to give them commandments “that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!” (Deuteronomy 5:29; cf. 10:13). Not only would obedience to God’s commandments bring forth His blessings (Deuteronomy 11:27; 28:2), but the missional imperative was to be a testimony of His wisdom and might to the nations of Planet Earth (Deuteronomy 4:6; 26:18-19; 28:1). Disobedience to the Torah would merit penalties and curses (Deuteronomy 11:28; 29:20). The clarion call issued from Moses was,

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Anyone who reads the Bible from the Books of Joshua and Judges onward knows the sad story. Not only did the Ancient Israelites widely demonstrate unfaithfulness, rebellion, and disdain toward the Torah’s instruction, but speaking of humankind in general Paul reports, “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Romans 1:21ff). He further says, “although they know the ordinance of God²⁷, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (Romans 1:32). Certainly when he observed this in the First Century C.E., enough Greeks and Romans had interacted with the Jewish Synagogue, and as the Roman historian Tacitus records, the stereotypical view of the Jewish community and God’s Torah by the Romans was not very positive:

²⁶ Consult the author’s exegetical paper on Micah 4:1-4 and Isaiah 2:2-4, “The Torah Will Go Forth From Zion,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

²⁷ Grk. *to dikaiōma tou Theou* (τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ); “the righteous judgment of God” (NKJV).

“Whatever their origin, these observances are sanctioned by their antiquity. The other practices of the Jews are sinister and revolting, and have entrenched themselves by their very wickedness...Though a most lascivious people, the Jews avoid sexual intercourse with women of alien race. Among themselves nothing is barred. They have introduced the practice of circumcision to show that they are different from others. Proselytes to Jewry adopt the same practices, and the very first lesson they learn is to despise the gods, shed all feelings of patriotism, and consider parents, children and brothers as readily expendable. However, the Jews see to it that their numbers increase. It is a deadly sin to kill a born or unborn child...They hold it to be impious to make idols of perishable materials in the likeness of man: for them, the Most High and Eternal cannot be portrayed by human hands and will never pass away. For this reason they erect no images in their cities, still less in their temple” (*The Histories* 5.5).²⁸

Here, some of Tacitus’ strongest criticisms of the Jewish people include the acknowledgment of the LORD (YHWH) as the only God (cf. Romans 1:28), a repudiation of them not fashioning idols for worship (cf. Romans 1:23), and criticism for how all human life *unborn and born* is to be treated as precious (cf. Romans 1:24). Of course, disobedience to God’s commandments is surely found within the Historical Books of the Tanach as well, as the Israelites themselves were less-than-faithful to Moses’ Teaching. So, whether it be the people of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms violating God’s commandments, or pagan Greeks and Romans in the time of the Apostles being incensed when they heard about them, **the human sin problem is quite immense.**

A sad response of many people throughout history is that when an authority comes onto the scene and tells them “You cannot do this!” they *almost immediately* violate whatever has been told to them. The observation of Paul in Romans 5:20 is not unjustified: “The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” A main consequence, as easily witnessed by a survey of the Tanach Scriptures, is that once Moses delivered the commandments to Israel, *the people* surely *started breaking them.*

Many of today’s Christians read Romans 5:20 from the perspective that the Torah’s arrival onto the scene was one which was largely negative and restrictive. The Ancient Israelites were a nation of slaves and they needed laws and injunctions to keep them in line, after all. A common thought is that the problem of *the Law* had to be dealt with, and so once Jesus arrived and was sacrificed, the time of the Law was over—and with it no more commandments to break. This perspective regarding the giving of the Law of Moses, though, cannot only be somewhat degrading to the Torah, but it most especially underestimates the significance of the Torah’s place within God’s unfolding plan of salvation history. The masterful observations offered by C.E.B. Cranfield, reflecting a Reformed perspective, help us to frame Romans 5:20 from the point of view of a definite solution needing to be offered for the problem of *human sin*:

“If sin, which was already present and disastrously active in mankind, though as yet nowhere clearly visible and defined, were ever to be decisively defeated and sinners forgiven in a way worthy of the goodness and mercy of God and recreated in newness of life, it was first of all necessary that sin should increase somewhere among men in the sense of becoming clearly manifest....When this is realized, it is possible to see that the law, even in its apparently negative and disastrous effects is, for Paul, the instrument of the mercy of God.”²⁹

As rudimentary as it may sound, the result of Romans 5:20 is Romans 5:21. Paul indicates, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). The ultimate purpose was “that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord” (Romans 5:21). Once the Law of God was established and given to Israel through Moses, human sin was able

²⁸ Cornelius Tacitus: *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp 273-274.

²⁹ C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 1-8* (London: T&T Clark, 1975), pp 292-293.

to be fully exposed for how despicable and worthless and damnable it truly was, **and it could then be decisively dealt with in the sacrifice of Yeshua.** Tim Hegg appropriately concurs in his Romans commentary, “as the Torah points out the reality of sin, it also points to the inability of man to overcome sin on his own. In this way the Torah pointed to Yeshua, for it constantly directed mankind to the only remedy for his sin, namely, the salvation procured by the Messiah.”³⁰

In Romans 5:20, the Apostle Paul is sure to emphasize the fact that as human sin increased, God’s grace increased as well. In fact, while most often rendered as “abounded all the more” (NASU) or “increased all the more” (NIV) or even “multiplied even more” (HCSB), the Greek verb *hyperperisseuō* (ὑπερπερισσεύω) can actually mean “**to cause someone to superabound in someth., supply lavishly**” (BDAG).³¹ The verb *hyperperisseuō* is “a strengthened form” of *perisseuō* (περισσεύω), which normally means, “to exist in abundance” (*Vine*).³² When we examine these definitions we see that as the sin of humanity abounded to great levels, the grace of God abounded to a higher extent that it was able to exceed and overcome the evil.

Many of today’s evangelical Christians may be of the false assumption, a result of being under-informed about the Tanach or Old Testament, that grace did not exist before the arrival of Yeshua (Jesus).³³ Many Believers, whether they acknowledge it consciously or not, do not often realize that if there had not been grace present before the Messiah’s sacrifice for us on the tree, the Lord would have without question eliminated Ancient Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exodus 32:12; Deuteronomy 9:26). Yet, it is *precisely because* of God’s grace and mercy that His full judgment is presently being withheld from Planet Earth today! The grace of God has always existed, because we know that even before people were placed on Planet Earth, Yeshua is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8, KJV).

It is also useful to be reminded of how grace and mercy and love were always integral parts of Ancient Judaism, and were certainly not foreign concepts to Yeshua’s Rabbinical contemporaries. Among the many references that could be offered, consider this summary from the Talmud:

A Tannaite authority of the house of R. Anan taught, “What is the sense of Scripture’s statement, ‘The roundings of your thighs’ (Son. 7:2)? Why are the teachings of Torah compared to the thigh? It is to teach you that, just as the thigh is kept hidden, so teachings of Torah are to be kept hidden.”

That is in line with what R. Eleazar said, “What is the sense of the verse of Scripture, ‘It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God’ (Mic. 6:8)? ‘To do justly’ refers to justice. ‘To love mercy’ refers to doing deeds of loving kindness. ‘And to walk humbly with your God’ refers to taking out a corpse for burial and bringing the bride in to the marriage-canopy. And is it not a matter of argument a fortiori: Now if, as to matters which are ordinarily done in public, the Torah has said, ‘To walk humbly,’ matters which are normally done in private, all the more so [must they be done humbly and in secret, that is, the giving of charity is done secretly].”

Said R. Eleazar, “Greater is the one who carries out an act of charity more than one who offers all the sacrifices. For it is said, ‘To do charity and justice is more desired by the Lord than sacrifice’ (Pro. 21:3).”

And R. Eleazar said, “An act of loving kindness is greater than an act of charity. For it is said, ‘Sow to yourselves according to your charity, but reap according to your loving kindness’ (Hos. 10:12). If a man sows seed, it is a matter of doubt whether he will eat a crop or not. But if a man harvests the crop, he most certainly will eat it.”

³⁰ Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, Vol 1 (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2005), pp 128-129.

³¹ BDAG, 1034.

³² *Vine*, 6.

³³ Consult the following references from the Tanach or Old Testament proving that grace did definitely exist before Yeshua: Jeremiah 31:2; Zechariah 12:10; Psalm 45:2; 84:11; Proverbs 3:34.

And R. Eleazar said, "An act of charity is rewarded only in accord with the loving kindness that is connected with it. For it is said, 'Sow to yourselves according to your charity, but reap according to your loving kindness' (Hos. 10:12)" (b.Sukkah 49b).³⁴

Mercy and love have always been foundational characteristics of Ancient Judaism, which many Christians unfortunately are just not aware of. Many of today's evangelical Protestants also sadly believe that grace and mercy are only "New Testament" concepts, and that they did not exist in the period of the "Old Testament." But are we simply looking for "grace"? There is more we must realize.

Consider the fact that the Greek word usually translated as "grace" in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), *charis* (χάρις), occurs 155 times. The word *eleos* (ἔλεος), usually rendered as "mercy," only occurs 27 times.

The Hebrew word commonly translated as "grace," *chein* (חַן) occurs only 70 times in the Tanach (Old Testament). However, the word *chesed* (חֶסֶד), which is rendered as either "mercy" or "lovingkindness," appears 255 times.³⁵

If we were to look at the numbers for these terms alone, it may appear as though there were more mercy, lovingkindness, or *chesed* in the Tanach (Old Testament) than there is mercy or *eleos* in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament). Likewise, it seems that there is more grace or *charis* in the Apostolic Scriptures, than there is grace or *chein* in the Tanach. **But this cannot be the case.** Mercy, grace, lovingkindness—or however one chooses to label these great virtues—are all characteristics of our Heavenly Father. These characteristics exist in all the pages of the entire Bible, both in the Tanach (Old Testament) and Messianic Writings (New Testament).

"Grace" by no means is only a "New Testament" idea. Grace, mercy, kindness, and compassion are all interrelated concepts that are evidenced throughout Scripture. While the specific term "grace" might not always be used—compassion, lovingkindness, and faithfulness have always been characteristics of our Heavenly Father. The grace of God certainly does cover our violation of His commandments, but this does not give redeemed Believers who acknowledge Yeshua as Savior the right to go out and murder, steal, adulterate, blaspheme, and worship other gods—among many heinous sins! Instead, Messiah followers are to emulate His example for living, which includes adherence to Moses' Teaching. The message of Romans 5:20-21 is that if you find yourself more prone to break God's Law than to keep it: **make sure that you know the Father's provision of salvation in Yeshua!** And if one truly has salvation, then the ability to defeat sin and see it vanquished to one's personal past *should surely be present.*

"Sin takes opportunity through the commandments and becomes alive by increasing our desires to break them (Romans 7:8-9)."

The pastor is accurate in saying that sin can certainly take an opportunity through the commandments of the Torah, but this is also misleading. In Romans 7:8-9 the Apostle Paul writes of the sinner's dilemma: "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died." The pastor's intent is to claim that if the Torah were not present in someone's life, that he or she would not be a sinner. By implication, if today's Christians stay away from the Law of Moses and do not try to keep any of its commandments, then will they never be "sinners"? Actually, as is seen throughout the discussion of

³⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

³⁵ All four of these figures were determined using a lemma search of the Hebrew Tanach (WTT) and Greek New Testament (BGT) in BibleWorks 8.0.

Romans ch. 7, the Torah's commandments need to be present, in order for a sinner to fully come to the Lord in repentance.

The pastor makes a critical error in failing to reference the preceding verse, Romans 7:7, which is important in order for us to understand what is being communicated in Romans 7:8-9. The struggling sinner acknowledges, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET.'" Being aware of the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21), the person in Romans 7 testifies that "sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:7, NIV).

While it may be true that sin is dead "apart from the Law" (Romans 7:7), it is later asserted how "Therefore did that which is good become a *cause of death* for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful" (Romans 7:13). Only with the standard of the Torah present, can "sin be recognized as sin" (NIV). Death, a condition of exile and separation from God, then follows (Romans 7:9-10).

Violation of the Torah's commandments on the part of a person who is "unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (Romans 7:14, NIV), yet who knows the right thing to do in accordance with the Torah but struggles with it (Romans 7:15-21), causes a life of agony and discontent. The condition of such a person is that on one hand he or she rejoices in the high standard of God in His Torah (Romans 7:22), but on the other he or she fails to really implement it in life (Romans 7:23-24) though there is a want to. The person eventually has to acknowledge the ongoing conflict **and finally come to Yeshua as Savior** for resolution (Romans 7:25). In so doing, the sinner can be freed from condemnation (Romans 8:1), because the Torah on its own cannot redeem a person (Romans 8:3). The regenerated person is able to recognize that in being filled with the Holy Spirit, a life of obedience to the righteous requirements of the Law can now be truly possible (Romans 8:4), as is surely promised in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27).

The situation of Romans ch. 7 largely describes a person who is on his or her way to salvation.³⁶ This individual knows what God's commandments are, recognizes their Divine origin and supernatural inspiration, and sincerely wants to keep them. But because of a weakness in the heart and mind, obedience to the Lord is a major struggle. The person has to come to the end of himself or herself, a "death" to self if you will, and recognizes that the way for deliverance has been provided: "Thanks be to God through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord!" (Romans 7:25a). The duality of obeying the Law only in the mind, but serving sin via the flesh can be remedied. Think of how many people today, either Jews who were reared in the Torah from time of birth, or many Protestants who were raised with a healthy appreciation for the Old Testament—who feel condemned as they struggle to obey God—**and who have yet to have an experience with the Living Yeshua (Jesus)**. Eventually, through whatever circumstances the Father has ordained, such people are able to see *the Torah point to the Messiah*. (Sadly, though, a wide variety of these persons only realize who the Savior is in their final days, when they know that they have to make their peace with the Creator God, and they are reminded of what they may have been told as children from the Bible.)

The gift of the Holy Spirit to regenerated people is such "that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4, ESV). In so walking by the Spirit, obedience to God's Torah is to come naturally. *To dikaiōma tou nomou plērōthē en hēmin* (τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου πληρωθῆ ἐν ἡμῖν) means "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us"

³⁶ Note that this is assuming usage of the ancient rhetorical device *prosopopeia*, where the "I" Paul speaks of is not himself but rather a hypothetical person.

(KJV) *precisely* by the Holy Spirit that guides our every step and action.³⁷ If a struggling sinner can recognize “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), **then a born again Believer should realize it even more so!** Should we err and stray from the Torah, the presence of the Lord should convict us to go to Him in prayer for forgiveness. Lest the idea that the redeemed should walk in a total phobia of God as they seek to obey Him, Cranfield offers the excellent observation:

“πληρωθῆ [plērōthē] is not to be taken to imply that the faithful fulfill the law’s requirement perfectly...They fulfil it in the sense that they do have a real faith in God (which is the law’s basic demand), in the sense that their lives are definitely turned in the direction of obedience, that they do sincerely desire to obey and are earnestly striving to advance even nearer to perfection.”³⁸

In properly responding to the pastor’s claim that “sin takes opportunity through the commandments,” we should again all understand *that salvation cannot be earned through keeping the Torah’s commandments*. But, it is those very Torah commandments which define what every person is guilty of breaking, and should reveal our common need for the Savior who is our Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). Unfortunately, when many Christians today try to determine “what sin is,” they largely do not have a clue because they have been incorrectly taught that the Messiah abolished the Law of Moses.

A modern theological definition of sin may be something like, as the *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* indicates, “The fundamental unbelief, distrust, and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.”³⁹ While all of us should agree that sin includes a willful rejection of God and of His centrality in our lives, this is a rather vague definition of sin.

Sin is usually defined by many contemporary pastors as being “bad things,” but without following the established Biblical standards of what “bad things” are, the meaning of “bad things” can often be determined by errant human judgments—or at least can vary from person to person. *Sin can be given a very gray and vague definition, and often leads to ungodly behavior on the part of many*. Thankfully, however, via the growth of today’s Messianic movement the Lord is raising up many Believers who know what He considers acceptable and unacceptable, and are living Torah obedient lives empowered by His Holy Spirit. Those of us who make up this emerging faith community have the responsibility to demonstrate that we are living more and more like the Messiah, especially via the acts of kindness and mercy that are becoming of those who follow His teachings (James 1:25, 27; 2:8).

In our day the Lord is restoring the validity of the Torah to His people (cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3), **but we are also** witnessing a considerable rise in sin and unbiblical behavior—most disturbingly among many who claim to be Messiah followers. It may very well be that as God restores a Torah foundation to His people—with sin being Biblically and consciously identified as violation of the Law for many people—there will be different reactions to it. There will be people who accept this, are convicted of their sin, and who truly and sincerely endeavor to see their lives change in conformity with His Word. There will be others who reject this, reject what the Scriptures say about sin, be convicted that sin is violation of the Torah, but *then* choose to disobey God rather than obey Him. This is why Yeshua says, “Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s

³⁷ Note how the verb *plērōthē* is an aorist passive, with God’s Spirit specified in Romans 8:4 as the Agent by which this fulfilling occurs. Within theological Greek language studies, verbs such as this are often considered Divine passives.

Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1996), pp 437-438.

³⁸ Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 384.

³⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 107.

McKim, 260 in the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* offers a much better definition:

“Theologically, sin is the human condition of separation from God that arises from opposition to God’s purposes. It may be breaking God’s law, failing to do what God wills, or rebellion. It needs forgiveness by God.”

love will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). Eventually we will reach a point in time where the rise of lawlessness is going to get so bad that hatred toward others will eventually take over. *But we are not there quite yet.*

Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord and Savior, and our Rabbi, demonstrated how we are to be Torah obedient. He loved His Heavenly Father and He loved others. But Yeshua also kept the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, the appointed times or *moedim*, and He ate kosher. Yeshua did not come to do away with these things and the other important elements of the Torah that define holiness. Yeshua came to show His followers how they can keep the commandments properly, both the commandments dealing with one's internal heart attitude, and how one is to conduct himself or herself in the world. By us keeping these same commandments—as He did—we can demonstrate to the world that we are different. It is our being different that is going to attract people to us so that we can testify to them the good news of salvation, and show them how God has blessed our lives. The person in Romans 7 who experiences salvation in the Messiah has been freed from the Torah's condemnation precisely so he or she can live a fulfilled life of faithful obedience and service (Romans 8:1-4). *Sin should then be something left in the past!*