

# Romans 10:4

## How can you say that the Law of Moses is still to be followed by Christians today, when it is quite clear that Jesus terminated the Law, being its end?

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**Pastor:** Romans 10:4: Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

**“For Messiah is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (NASU).**

Many people read Romans 10:4, as it appears in most English Bible versions, and view it as being definitive evidence that the Torah is no longer relevant to be followed. Our pastor’s claim that “Christ is the end of the law...” is quite frequent in discussion between Christians, Messianics, *and* Jews relating to the position that the Law of Moses plays, or does not play, in the lives of God’s people today. Is the claim of Romans 10:4 so absolute, meaning that the Messiah is the termination of the Torah? Or, might there be more that many Bible readers have overlooked? *Not enough probably understand that Romans 10:4 should never be read so simplistically.*

In Romans 10:1-3 we see that the larger issue at work is how the Apostle Paul is distraught over how many of his Jewish brethren have rejected the Messiah Yeshua, trying to find righteousness via their own actions and deeds:

“Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (NASU).

The answer to the dilemma of establishing one’s own righteousness is undeniably Yeshua the Messiah. Romans 10:4, in an English version like the NASU, communicates, **“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”** In what way is the Savior Yeshua the answer to the problem of establishing one’s own righteousness, if He is the “end,” viewed as being a nullification or abolishment of the Mosaic Law? If the Messiah really is the termination of Moses’ Teaching, would this not contradict His own words about the Torah not passing away (Matthew 5:17-19)?

The Contemporary English Version renders Romans 10:4 with, “But Christ makes the Law no longer necessary.” Is this what the Apostle Paul is really saying? Is the man who in Romans 3:31 says that Messiah followers are to “establish” or “uphold the law” (RSV/NIV), and who in Romans 7:12 could communicate that “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” and in Romans 7:14 that “the Law is spiritual,” and who even could claim in Romans 7:22 “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man”—suddenly saying that the Law of Moses is of no value?<sup>1</sup> If God’s Torah is valid in these preceding verses, then some further examination on what Romans 10:4 actually communicates is imperative.

If one were to only examine the English text of this verse, it could seem that our pastor has a legitimate claim against those who believe that the Torah or Law of Moses should be heeded and followed as valid instruction today. Many of today’s Christians will eagerly point out the word “end” in Romans 10:4 and simply say, “*Jesus Christ terminated the Law of Moses.*” But how many English speakers are aware of the fact that this is a stretch for the English language? *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, for example, does define the English word “end” with the definition “an outcome; result.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a little more elementary would be how in *Webster’s*

<sup>1</sup> I would clarify that even if Paul is using the rhetorical device of prosopopeia in the latter passages of Romans 7:12, 14, 22—Paul speaking as an imaginary “I”—the sentiments of the Torah being of value are still very much Paul’s personal feelings.

<sup>2</sup> *Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, second edition (Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, Inc, 2002), 209.

*Intermediate Dictionary*, designed as clearly printed on its cover “for young teenagers,” appears a critical definition for “end” that can go overlooked even by some of the most well-trained seminary professors: “the goal toward which an agent acts or should act.”<sup>3</sup> In the English language alone is an available definition of “end” that does not mean “termination” or “abolishment.” The English sentence, “the end of all of NASA’s work is the putting of a man on the moon,”<sup>4</sup> clearly does not mean that once Apollo 11 landed on the lunar surface that the existence of NASA and the exploration and study of space all of a sudden became irrelevant. Although in some popular speech the English word “end” is not always akin to “goal,” it can legitimately be used this way.<sup>5</sup>

For Romans 10:4, our appeal must be principally made to the source text, which asserts *telos gar nomou Christos* (τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός). Among Greek lexicons, we should not be surprised to see that the word *telos* (te,loj)<sup>6</sup> too has a wider connotation of definitions not limited to “end.” A critical definition of *telos* provided by *BDAG* includes, “**the goal toward which a movement is being directed, end, goal, outcome**”<sup>7</sup>; *Thayer* offers us the definition, “*The end to which all things relate, the aim, purpose*”<sup>8</sup>; *Vine* says that it can mean “‘the aim or purpose’ of a thing”<sup>9</sup>; and *CGEDNT* provides the definition “*outcome, result, goal, aim, fulfillment*.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most importantly, *AMG* remarks that *telos* “does not, as is often supposed, mean the extinction, end or termination...It simply means the goal reached.”<sup>11</sup>

It would not be wrong by any means to translate Romans 10:4 as: “Christ is the goal of the Law” (Common English Bible) or “Christ is the aim of the Law” or “Christ is the purpose of the Law” or even “Christ is the fulfillment of the law” (*Lattimore*). The 2005 Today’s New International Version includes the much-improved rendering, “Christ is the culmination of the law.”<sup>12</sup> A footnote exists in the Contemporary English Version for Romans 10:4, which actually says, “Or ‘But Christ gives the full meaning to the Law.’”<sup>13</sup> (The Complete Jewish Bible, commonly used in today’s Messianic movement, offers the rendering: “For the goal at which the *Torah* aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts.”).

How one chooses to render the word *telos* (τέλος) is certainly dependent on one’s presuppositional bias. If one’s theological commitment is to the idea that Jesus Christ abolished the Law of Moses, then Romans 10:4 will be translated along the lines of termination. If one’s theological commitment is to the idea that Jesus Christ is the goal, purpose, or aim of the Law of Moses, then Romans 10:4 will at least be understood with “end” meaning this, and with “goal” as a preferred rendering. Recognizing the Messiah as the *telos* of the Mosaic Torah from this latter perspective has been acknowledged by many important Christian voices since the Protestant Reformation. From my own evangelical Christian background, John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* offered these comments on Romans 10:4:

“For Christ is the end of the law—The scope and aim of it. It is the very design of the law, to bring men to believe in Christ to justification and salvation. And He alone gives that pardon and life which the law shows the want of, but cannot give.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Webster’s Intermediate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1977), 245.

Even the strongly fundamentalist *The Christian Student Dictionary* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1982), 240 includes the definition “A purpose; goal” for the English word “end,” actually providing the explanatory sentence: “*To what end are you doing all that work?*”

<sup>4</sup> Tim Hegg, *Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: Chapters 9-16* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), 317.

<sup>5</sup> The 1993 German Elberfelder Bibel has “Denn Christus ist des Gesetzes Ende.” The term *Ende* primarily means “end; close; film etc.: ending; result, outcome” (*Langenscheidts New College German Dictionary*, 181), which likewise, in a language most closely related to English, does not necessarily imply termination.

<sup>6</sup> Given the theological and spiritual importance of τέλος, not only for Messianics in Romans 10:4, but how frequently you will see *telos* used in scholastic works, please be aware that it is properly pronounced as *tēlōs*, with both a short ē and short ō sound.

<sup>7</sup> *BDAG*, 998.

<sup>8</sup> *Thayer*, 620.

<sup>9</sup> *Vine*, 199.

<sup>10</sup> *CGEDNT*, 180.

<sup>11</sup> *Zodhiates, Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1376.

<sup>12</sup> The *NIV Study Bible*, 1761 while employing the 1984 New International version which uses, “Christ is the end of the law,” does say interestingly enough, “Although the Greek for ‘end’ (*telos*) can mean either (1) ‘termination,’ ‘cessation,’ or (2) ‘goal,’ ‘culmination,’ ‘fulfillment,’ it seems best here to understand it in the latter sense.” But the commentary goes even further, surprisingly stating,

“Christ is the fulfillment of the law...in the sense that he brought it to its completion by obeying perfectly its demands and by fulfilling its types and prophecies. Christians are no longer ‘under law’...since Christ has freed them from its condemnation, but the law still plays a role in their lives.”

<sup>13</sup> *Holy Bible, Contemporary English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1995), 971.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 561.

Some might wonder, given the strong evidence in favor of *telos* (τέλος) meaning something along the lines of goal, purpose, aim, or even culmination—why more of today’s English Bibles have not represented a more pro-Torah position on Romans 10:4. Not very many laypersons are aware of **the considerable amount of ink spilled in Romans commentaries and theological resources over this verse**. Surveying a small selection of publications released over the past half-century, a majority still seems to favor *telos* being some kind of a termination of the Mosaic Torah,<sup>15</sup> a minority favors *telos* as the Messiah being the goal of the Torah,<sup>16</sup> and others simply list the interpretational possibilities without necessarily favoring one or another.<sup>17</sup> Messianic commentators today, most understandably, favor *telos* to mean “goal.”<sup>18</sup>

Commentators, who are unfavorable to the continued validity of the Torah or Law of Moses in the post-resurrection era, still have to certainly recognize the possibility that *telos* (τέλος) can mean something other than “end” as akin to “termination.” Witherington indicates the dilemma for the interpreter having to choose: “for end/termination/purpose/goal of the Law [is] Christ for righteousness for all those believing.”<sup>19</sup> Some interpreters, recognizing how “end” as akin to “termination” can be seen as being a bit disrespectful to God’s (previous) revelation in the Mosaic Law, have opted for some combination of applications for the term *telos*. Moo thinks,

“[W]ith the coming of Christ the authority of the law of Moses is, in some basic sense, at an end. At the same time, a teleological nuance is also present. This is suggested not only by the contextual factors...but also by the fact that similar NT uses of *telos* generally preserve some sense of direction or goal. In other words, the ‘end’ that *telos* usually denotes is an end that is the natural or inevitable result of something else. The analogy of a race course (which many scholars think *telos* is meant to convey) is helpful: the finish line is both the ‘termination’ of the race (the race is over when it is reached) and the ‘goal’ of the race (the race is run for the sake of reaching the finish line)...The English word ‘end’ perfectly captures this nuance; but, if it is thought that it implies too temporal a meaning, we might also use the words ‘culmination,’ ‘consummation,’ or ‘climax.’”<sup>20</sup>

Moo, who does not believe in the continued validity of the Mosaic Law in the post-resurrection era, argues that *telos* regards the Messiah being the “goal” of the Torah along the lines of someone crossing the finish line of a race, which would then terminate the race. Yet the Messiah Himself actually directs those who have found Him, to uphold the continued authority of Moses’ Teaching, instructing its commandments to others (Matthew 5:19). To his credit, though, Moo offers an array of alternative translations for *telos* like culmination, consummation, and climax that those who favor the continued validity of the Torah in the post-resurrection era should welcome in modern English translations (like the TNIV), as these English terms draw the attention of the reader to how the Torah is *to point to the Messiah*.

The argument as to what *telos* (τέλος) means in Romans 10:4 does need to take into consideration various linguistic factors, the least of which concern how *telos* is used in the Epistle to the Romans. N.T. Wright describes how “The...problem with the mainstream reading is Paul’s use of the word *telos* and its cognates elsewhere, not least in Romans itself. The only other occurrences of the noun in this letter come in 6:21-22: ‘the end of those things is death<sup>21</sup>...the fruit you have is unto sanctification, and its end is eternal life<sup>22</sup>.’ By itself, we might be misled into reading the first of these as meaning ‘termination,’ but the second makes it clear what Paul means is ‘goal.’ Sanctification leads to, points toward, eternal life, and is consummated and completed thereby.”<sup>23</sup>

When the Apostle Paul communicates to his disciple Timothy about *telos tēs parangelias* (τέλος τῆς παραγγελίας), this is not at all to be understood as “the termination of our instruction,”<sup>24</sup> but instead “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5, NASU). Other

<sup>15</sup> Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:110-111; James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 38b. (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp 596-597; Stott, *The Message of Romans*, pp 281-282; Walter C. Kaiser, Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Branch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), pp 563-566; Witherington, *Romans*, pp 260-261.

<sup>16</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), pp 515-520; Wright, in *NIB*, 10:655-658.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce, *Romans*, 190.

<sup>18</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp 395-396; Hegg, *Romans 9-16*, pp 316-319.

<sup>19</sup> Witherington, *Romans*, 260.

<sup>20</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 641.

<sup>21</sup> Grk. *to gar telos ekeinōn thanatos* (τὸ γὰρ τέλος ἐκείνων θάνατος); “For the outcome of those things is death” (NASU).

<sup>22</sup> Grk. *to de telos zōēn aiōniōn* (τὸ δὲ τέλος ζώην αἰώνιον); “and the outcome, eternal life” (NASU).

<sup>23</sup> Wright, in *NIB*, 10:657.

<sup>24</sup> The KJV actually does have “the end of the commandment.”

valid renderings include “the aim of our charge” (RSV), “The whole point of what we're urging” (The Message), or even “the purpose of the commandment” (NKJV). *Telos* regards the purpose or the focus of someone's instruction in the faith, and as it regards Romans 10:4, such an educational goal or purpose for understanding the Messiah would be most appropriate to add to the components intended by *telos*. In Wright's valid estimation, though, he approaches *telos* in Romans 10:4 from the perspective of Yeshua being the Torah's climax:

“I conclude that in 10:4 Paul does not intend to declare the law's abrogation in favor of a different ‘system,’ but rather to announce that the Messiah is himself the climax of the long story of God and Israel, the story Torah tells and in which it plays a vital though puzzling part. God's purposes in Torah, purposes both negative and positive, have reached their goal in the Messiah, and the result of that is the accessibility and availability of ‘righteousness’ for *all who believe*.”<sup>25</sup>

Theologically speaking, it is by far most imperative that *telos* (τέλος) in Romans 10:4 be approached from the perspective of goal, aim, purpose, or even climax—and **not** termination. What is the Apostle Paul really trying to communicate? Is he not trying to say that his own fellow Jews have largely missed the point of the Torah? Does he not express the frustration, “since they are unaware of God's way of making people righteous and instead seek to set up their own, they have not submitted themselves to God's way of making people righteous” (Romans 10:3, CJB)? If God's Torah were approached properly, then whether it be First Century Jews who were unable to see Yeshua as the Deliverer or modern Christians who need greater clarification in the ways of holiness and obedience—then the Torah could rightly serve as the foundation of one's understanding of salvation history. Without Moses' Teaching, you cannot fully appreciate the arrival of the Messiah onto the stage of not only redemption for all humanity—but *yourself personally*. The common mortal inability to obey the commandments in the Law, for example, is to clearly point us to the need **we all have** for a Divine Savior!

Representing a rather standard view that *telos* (τέλος) in Romans 10:4 means “goal,” we should fully concur with Cranfield's excellent conclusions:

“[I]n this passage Paul is concerned to show that Israel has misunderstood the law. At this point a statement that Christ is the goal to which all along the law has been directed, its true intention and meaning, is altogether apposite. Israel has misunderstood the law, because it failed to recognize what it was all about...So we conclude that τέλος should be understood in the sense...Christ is the goal, the aim, the intention of the law—apart from Him it cannot be properly understood at all....We conclude that the verse as a whole means: For Christ is the goal of the law, and it follows that a status of righteousness is available to every one who believes.”<sup>26</sup>

Within Romans 10:4, the Apostle Paul is by no means communicating that Yeshua the Messiah is the abolition of the Mosaic Torah; in being the *telos nomou* (τέλος νόμου) Yeshua the Messiah is the Torah's goal, its climax, its inevitable outcome, or even its dénouement. Arriving at saving faith in the Messiah of Israel is the *resultant end*, with Him being the consummation to whom the Torah points.

Paul does not say that Yeshua the Messiah terminated the validity and relevance of the Law of Moses, as Romans 10:4 is so commonly misinterpreted. The purpose of the Torah—and **indeed all of Holy Scripture**—is that it must point to our innate human need for a Savior. If we can realize how “through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20b, NASU), *then* we can also realize how “Messiah is the goal of the Torah for righteousness to everyone who believes” (my translation). Recognizing that we all fall short of His high standard (Romans 3:23), each man and woman must be convicted of sin, cry out in repentance before the Father, and receive the forgiveness that He offers in His Son. The Torah is to always show us the need for a Redeemer, and the fact that we need salvation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wright, in *NIB*, 10:658.

<sup>26</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, pp 519-520.

<sup>27</sup> For further reading on Romans 10:4, consult the author's article “Is Messiah the Termination of the Torah?”, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.