

The Bible: Our True Story
 Act Three—
 “...Under the gracious rule of God”

Passages: Jeremiah 2:1–13
 Matthew 22:34–40

Life and Law go together!

What do I mean? Well, everyone who has studied science knows that, without the laws of nature (which include the laws of gravity, quantum physics, electromagnetism, the strength of nuclear force, the ratio of dark matter to ordinary matter, the ratio of protons to neutrons...etc.) nothing could live on this planet! It is only because our world has these fixed, natural laws...laws that govern the relationships between atoms and molecules and sub-atomic particles...that our world has the necessary order to allow life to flourish! Without that order, life could never exist!

In fact, more and more, scientists are discovering just how incredibly fine-tuned these laws of nature are, and how even the slightest shift would mean the destruction of life!

These are the laws that God has put in place to make life flourish on this planet! The Bible, however, never calls them the laws of nature-- it calls them the Laws of God. This is what Psalm 119 is trying to say. Listen to verses 89–91.

⁸⁹ Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. ⁹⁰ Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.

⁹¹ Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.”

The Psalmist is proclaiming that God’s Law governs the universe, making this earth a life-sustaining place...a place where all things serve their Creator.

What I’m trying to say is that both the scientific and Biblical understanding of life on this planet insist on the importance of **Laws**! We agree that life is dependent on law and that, for life to exist, there must be unchangeable laws that bring order to the

relationships between atoms and molecules and sub-atomic particles!

But, of course, we can even go further than this! The social scientist also agrees with the Bible that human beings need laws as well! Without laws, the social fabric breaks down and we end up living in chaos and disorder. Without laws, human beings easily become self-serving, greedy and, ultimately, self-destructive! In the same way that the universe needs laws to promote life, humankind needs laws to govern our social interactions and communal behaviour. We need laws which will promote life and, at the same time, overrule our natural inclinations towards selfishness and greed. We need a Word which will bind humanity together in an ordered, life-giving community.

Once again, Life and Law go together. And that's why, ever since the beginning of creation, God has been speaking His Word...His Law...over creation **and** over humanity...to keep both of them prospering and alive!

Now, some Christians think that God's Law was an afterthought; they think it was given in response to the Fall, as God's instrument to punish sin and keep people in line. But that can't be true! In much the same way that the laws of nature were written into creation, God wrote the laws of human behaviour into the hearts of his first children, Adam and Eve, as an expression of His great love! His law was given so that they might live the best possible life on this planet...a life of harmony and peace! And so, from the very beginning, God gave His Word...His Law...to establish the norms of acceptable human behaviour; a behaviour that would be mutually beneficial to all.

This is why Psalm 19 speaks about God's Law in such glowing terms! After extolling the glory of God's world created by His Word, the Psalmist says:

**⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.**

⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.

¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

David obviously saw no separation between **Life and Law!** He recognised that both come from God; that both are good. But, of course, neither can truly exist apart from a relationship with God. It is inside a relationship with God that the **Law and Life** support and protect each other.

When you understand this, you will quickly see why, back in the Garden of Eden, Satan's entire strategy for the downfall of the universe involved getting Adam and Eve to break their relationship with God by questioning the goodness of His commands; to question whether He had the right to issue laws over human behaviour. Indeed, Satan knew that if he could get human beings to doubt the laws of God, he was on the road to undermining God's entire Kingdom! As we've seen, God's Kingdom is made up of 3 elements, working in relational harmony: **God's people**, living in **God's place**, under **God's rule!** But once Adam and Eve began to doubt the goodness of God and His laws, it was easy to get them to quench God's Spirit and defy God's rule, thus bringing anarchy into this world.

This same doubt and anarchy continued in their offspring! That's exactly what we see in Genesis 3–11. Indeed, humankind not only doubted God's law but proudly passed judgment on whether God really knew what He was talking about! As a result, **everyone did what was right in their own eyes!** The world was spinning faster and faster into chaos, and not even the flood could stop it!

That's the reason why God chose Abram and Sarai, and took them into a new land. God was simply going to start again, **creating a new people by His Word; a people who, in a dynamically**

loving relationship with God, would listen to His commands and obey His laws. Or, to put it in Kingdom terminology, God was calling a **new people** to a **new land**, to live under God's ancient and eternal Word...**His rule**, ...to fully align themselves with the same life-giving Laws by which He created and sustains the universe.

Now, it's interesting to note that, for almost 600 years (200 years in Canaan and another 400 years in Egypt) God's Law was never written down! It was a verbal law...a law entirely based on oral traditions and stories passed down from generation to generation. Clearly, **the general concepts** of the law...to love God (through worship, etc.) and one's neighbour (through kindness, etc)... would have been enough to keep Abraham and his 70-plus descendants on the straight and narrow as far as healthy relationships were concerned.

But when Israel came out of Egypt, their number had increased to over 2 million people! And so, the question had to be asked: Could the social fabric of this growing nation be held together with orally-based laws, or was a more detailed law-code necessary? The answer was obvious! And so, God brought His people to the foot of Mt. Sinai in the desert. Here was the place that God would introduce **the TORAH!**

Now, the word '**Torah**', often translated as 'Law', literally means guidance and direction! And that's exactly what God's Law has always been—God's guidance and direction on the best way that human beings can live in peace and harmony (with God, with fellow human beings, and with the natural world around them)! Of course, those who have made a detailed study of the laws given to Moses on Mt. Sinai estimate that he received a total of **613 laws!** (You can find these laws scattered throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.) And although that sounds like a lot of laws, we need to remember that there was only one overriding theme to them all: the theme of **Life!** (As I've been saying, **Life and Law go together!**) And so, at the heart of

all 613 Laws was God's loving admonition to His people: "Here is the best way to live!"

Indeed, that seems to be the reason why so many of these laws ended with the threat of death. The thinking seems to have been that if you were not going to choose the way of life, then you might as well die right now-- For that is exactly where you are headed, and you are taking others with you!

One more thing should be noted here: Although there were 613 laws given to Moses, you really only needed to remember **ten** of them! You see, while Moses was on the mountain with God, he was given 2 tablets which contained just Ten Laws (or Ten Words); what we now call the Ten Commandments. **These were a basic summary of everything that they had talked about!**

Hence, the first four of these 'Words' dealt with a person's relationship with God: Don't have any other gods but Me; Don't make idols; Don't misuse my name; Keep the Sabbath." The remaining six 'Words' dealt with a person's relationships with other Israelites, starting with your Mum and Dad: (Honour your mother and father) , moving on to your wife/husband (no adultery), then to your neighbour-- don't kill; don't steal; don't lie; don't covet! In other words, these ten words pretty much covered every relationship in Israel!

As I've been saying, **Law and Life go together!** As Israel aligned itself with God's Word, there would be incredible blessings of life that would flow into every relationship; not simply because God would be pleased with His people, but because the universe would be returned to its original harmony: the relational harmony of **law and life!** Listen to God's promises in Deuteronomy 28:1-6!

1 If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: 3 You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. 4 The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and

the crops of your land and the young of your livestock-- the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. 5 Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. 6 You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

The blessings of life were meant to flow from the Law, even flowing out to the nations around Israel! For as Israel lived within the blessings of life and law, they would be raised up above the fallen nations 'round about them, **and so attract the world to the God of order and relational blessing!**

But, of course, just as it was with Adam and Eve, so with Israel; the demonic forces of doubt were allowed to enter into God's new land. Gradually, the people of Israel lost faith in God's Word and His Laws were no longer seen to be good! Indeed, by the time of the Judges, we're told that **"everyone did what was right in their own eyes."** What bedlam! Nobody has any concern for others!

Worse still, over the next 400 years, a succession of evil kings rose to power in Israel who had no relationship with God and no inclination to live by His good Law. As you can imagine, the entire nation descended into moral and social chaos!

And even when King Josiah discovered the Book of the Law in some back room of the Temple and urgently called for reforms to be made throughout the land to get Israel back to God's Law, it was too late! The chaos which was now so widespread in Israel meant that the nation could not defend itself from foreign attack. (How can you establish an army when **everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes?**)

This is where today's passage from **Jeremiah 2** comes in. In verses 1-3, Jeremiah speaks about the good, old days, when **God's people** were first brought into **God's land** and were fully aligned with **God's law**. It was in this relationship of confident trust in God's Word that God's blessings flowed.

But, in verses 5–6, Jeremiah goes on to speak of the evil influences of Israel’s Kings. **“What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.”**

This failure of **the Kings** to follow God’s law is going to be one of the central reasons why Israel will soon be invaded by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and taken into exile. But it’s not the only reason! You see, there was one more group in Israel who was meant to keep the Kings on the straight and narrow, also instructing the people in their relationship with God and the blessings of living according to His Law. And so, in verses 7 and 8, Jeremiah turns and speaks to **the priests!**

“I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. The priests did not ask, “Where is the Lord?” Those who deal with the law did not know me!”

Did you hear that? **“The priests did not ask, “Where is the Lord?” Those who deal with the law did not know me”???** How could that be? Why didn’t the priests ask, Where is the Lord? What were they so busy doing that they hadn’t noticed that God had departed from Israel? **How could the ones in charge of the Law not know God?** The answer is **legalism!**

You see a legalist is someone who spends all their time and energy on knowing God’s laws...every detail, every angle, every possibility...but has no clue as to the big picture of what the Law is really for! As I’ve been saying, Life and Law go together, but only in the context of an overarching relationship with God. If you lose that relationship, obedience to a written law–code becomes nothing but binding legalism...a legalism that brings death and judgment!

And this is exactly what was happening in Israel: While, on the one hand, **the kings** were liberally abandoning the Law of God, on the other hand, **the priests** had developed a legalistic understanding of the Law—dotting every ‘i’ and crossing every

't—to the point that they had lost sight of God. And so, both groups of leadership in Israel, the kings and the priests, were leading the people of God into death, not life!

It was into this mess that the prophet, Jeremiah, prophesies about a future day when God will start all over again:

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (31:33)

Jeremiah foresees a return to Eden, when God’s Law would be again imprinted on the minds and hearts of God’s people, as it was originally on Adam and Eve.

Now, can you see why Jesus had to come? As Jesus said, He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it. How? As the truly Spirit-filled man, Jesus had the Law of God written on His heart! That’s why He lived in perfect submission to the Father’s every Word! Furthermore, by His death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus was given the right to send God’s Spirit upon the new people gathered in His name and thus re-write God’s Law on our hearts and on our minds! Finally, God’s people would live in God’s place under the glory and beauty of God’s rule! In Jesus, God’s people would be aligned with the Spirit and Word of Life, empowered to bear fruit in healthy and wholesome relationships with God and neighbour!

That is what Jesus’ entire ministry was about! Indeed, listen to how the apostle Paul describes what Jesus did for us in Romans 8.

“And so he (Jesus) condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

With that in mind, you can better appreciate the story of Matthew 22, when a Pharisee comes to Jesus and asks Him; **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”** (Matt. 22:36).

Did this Pharisee have in mind all 613 laws given to Moses or only the 10 Commandments? We can’t be sure. But, Jesus’ response to

this man shows that **God has only ever had one intention behind all His Laws**—namely, life—to implant the desire on our hearts to live in relationships of harmony and love!

And so, Jesus boils down all of God's Laws (613 of them, boiled down to 10) to just 2 Laws—Love God and love your neighbour. **Indeed, if we live by the Spirit, then these 2 commands are all that we will need for abundant life in God's good creation!**

Why? Because **Life and Law go together!**

This is what it means to be God's people, in God's place, under God's rule!

Let's pray.