

# Binding and Loosing

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*“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).*

What is meant by this authority to bind and to loose? A failure to understand what is implied by these words will result in a failure to responsibly administer the authority that has been entrusted to us. This term has often been misapplied to circumstances that it was never intended to address. In order to ascertain what Jesus meant when he spoke these words we must look at how the terms were used in the Tenach and how the people of his day understood them.

## **Bound to Sin and Bound by the Law**

The true faith of Israel was always in the coming of the Messiah and Redeemer. Until his coming, sin had to be restrained by the law. In accepting the yoke of the Torah the people of Israel agreed before the presence of the LORD to be bound by all the terms of the covenant established at Mount Sinai. The Law of Moses was not given as the means to attain righteousness. Rather it was given as the means of exposing the sinful condition of our hearts and the extent to which we are all bound by sin. The same law provided an annual covering (atonement) for sin through the prescribed sacrifices. The fact that they had to be repeated year after year served to remind the people of their bondage to sin (Hebrews 10:3). The law gave authority to the Sanhedrin (the body comprising the elders and judges of Israel) to judge disputes between fellow Israelites and their decisions were binding (Dt. 17:11). The people were also bound by their oaths. The following is an example of men being bound by the oath of the king: Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, “Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!” so none of the troops tasted food (1 Sam. 14:24). According to this example, they would have been loosed (released) from this oath at evening time and once Saul had avenged himself of his enemies.

King David wrote the following by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Psalm 51:5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Nonetheless Rabbinical

Judaism denies the inherent sinfulness of mankind. Many Rabbis teach that man is essentially good and that he has the capacity to choose either good or evil. The apostle Paul wrote, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do— this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Rom. 7:19-20). By meditating on God's law and on his perfect holiness Paul realised his inherent sinfulness. This is the very purpose of the law – to bring us to the realisation that we are bound to sin and that only the Redeemer (i.e. the Messiah) can set us free. The perfection of the law is a constant reminder of how far we fall short of it and of the need to receive a change of heart which God alone could effect. In this regard the apostle Paul wrote, "...if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin (i.e., bound) so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held as prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed... Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" [i.e. we have been loosed] (Gal. 3:21-25).

The Law of Moses is based upon the Levitical Priesthood and a sacrificial system. Without the prescribed sacrifices there is no atonement, but the Rabbis suggest that atonement may be made by fasting and good deeds and that one may be found righteous by keeping what remains of the law. However, the Law of Moses does not allow for changes to be made to it: "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you" (Deut. 4:2). Neither will partial fulfilment of the law justify anyone for as the apostle James taught, "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). After the destruction of the temple it became impossible for anyone to live in complete obedience to the Torah, but God did not just remove the means of atonement under the old covenant without first providing a final atonement for sin through the new covenant. Therefore men are without excuse if they refuse the atonement that God has provided through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah. Thereafter God bound all men, Jew and Gentile, over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all (Rom. 11:32). For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (Heb. 2:2).

Refusal to acknowledge that all men have effectually been bound over to disobedience keeps people bound to sin and to a false piety, which is hypocrisy. Denial of our sinful condition can be compared to a cancer patient who is in a state of denial shortly after his condition has been

diagnosed. The Jews who rejected Jesus refused to acknowledge their bondage to sin and consequently continued with a pretence of religious piety, bound to sin and disobedience and condemned by the very law by which they hoped to be justified. Jesus said to them, *“Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”* (John 5:45-47). The law was intended to lead people to the Messiah who would set them free, but false piety conceals the real condition. Jesus saw right through the hypocrisy of the religious leadership in Israel. He made a very serious charge against the Pharisees, the founders of Rabbinical Judaism, who kept the people in bondage through the law: *“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger... But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in.”* (Matthew 23:4,13).

The very law that they purported to uphold sets forth God’s requirement for obedience. The LORD said to Moses, *“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account”* (Deut. 18:18). If we want to obey God we have to listen to the one whom He sent. This is binding on all men. All who refuse to listen to him will be called to give account. The LORD said through the prophet Habakkuk that the righteous will live by his faith. That faith only comes through hearing and obeying the word of God spoken through His Messiah. In harmony with Deuteronomy 18:19 whoever rejects the salvation of God, Yeshua the Messiah, remains under a curse. Accordingly the apostle Paul wrote, *“If anyone does not love the Lord; a curse be on him”* (1 Cor. 16:22).

### **The Authority of the Sanhedrin removed**

When Jesus said *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom,”* he was removing the authority that had formerly resided with the Sanhedrin and transferring it to the faithful leadership of the new covenant assembly. The failure of the Sanhedrin to listen to the *“prophet like Moses,”* and to believe in the one whom God had sent and to whom Moses and all the prophets testified, proved their unfaithfulness to God, despite an impressive outward show of piety.

Alfred Edersheim describes how the terms “binding” and “loosing” were used and understood during the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry:

“No other terms were in more constant use in Rabbinic Canon-Law than those of ‘binding and loosing.’ The words are the literal translation of the Hebrew equivalents *Asar*, which means ‘to bind,’ in the sense of prohibiting, and *Hittir*, which means ‘to loose,’ in the sense of permitting. For the latter the term *Shera* or *Sheri* is also used. But this expression is, both in Targumic and Talmudic diction, not merely the equivalent of permitting, but passes into that of remitting, or pardoning. On the other hand, ‘binding and loosing’ referred simply to things or acts, prohibiting or else permitting them, declaring them lawful or unlawful. This was one of the powers claimed by the Rabbis ... If this then represented the *legislative*, another pretension of the Rabbis, that of declaring ‘free’ or else ‘liable,’ i.e. guilty, expressed their claim to the judicial power. By the first of these they ‘bound’ or ‘loosed’ acts or things; by the second they ‘remitted’ or ‘retained,’ declared a person free from, or liable to punishment, to compensation, or to sacrifice. These two powers – the legislative and judicial – which belonged to the Rabbinic office, Christ now transferred... to His Apostles.

‘Binding and loosing’ included all the legislative functions for the new Church. . . In the view of the Rabbis heaven was like earth, and questions were discussed and settled by a heavenly Sanhedrin. Now, in regard to some of their earthly decrees, they were wont to say that ‘the Sanhedrin above’ confirmed what ‘the Sanhedrin beneath’ had done. But the words of Christ, as they avoided the foolish conceit of His contemporaries, left it not doubtful, but conveyed the assurance that, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, whatsoever they bound or loosed on earth would be bound or loosed in heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

We find another example in the writings of Josephus of how the authority to bind and loose was being used and abused at that time:

“The Pharisees themselves became the real administrators of the public affairs; they banished and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed at their pleasure; and to say all at once, they had the enjoyment of the royal authority, whilst the expenses and the difficulties of it belonged to Alexandra.”<sup>2</sup>

The gospels also provide evidence of the misuse of their authority to bind and loose. In Mark 7:13 we find the example wherein the Pharisees would sanction the practice of declaring property “Corban” (i.e. a gift dedicated to God) in order to release (loose) a man from his obligation under the law to provide for his parents, thus nullifying the Torah. The Pharisees set a strict code of religious observance by which they made a good outward appearance and by which they absolved the offences of those who showed a willingness to conform to their rules and interpretation of the Torah.

During the forty year transition period between the old covenant and the new covenant the early church was faced with critical decisions. Controversy arose when certain Jewish believers insisted that the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Under the old covenant this would certainly have been the process for proselytes to be converted and accepted into the covenant people. The elders of the new covenant assembly had to convene as the new “Sanhedrin” and use the authority which had been entrusted to them by Jesus to decide what was binding on Gentile believers. In other words they were using their authority to bind and loose. The writer to the Hebrews said that the old covenant had become obsolete when Jesus confirmed the new covenant and that what was obsolete and ageing would soon disappear (Heb. 8:13). However, before the destruction of the temple in 70AD, no-one dared to suggest that the Law of Moses was no longer binding on Israel. In considering the issue the apostle Peter said; “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? (This would amount to binding them to all of the Torah). No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:10-11). The following ruling was made concerning Gentile believers: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21).

### **Released from the Law of the Old Covenant?**

Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Torah (Matthew 5:17). How then does Jesus set us free (loose) from the law of the old covenant which bound us? The law is comprised of regulations which would make the people outwardly clean (Heb. 9:10;13), but it could not change the inward nature of the heart. The LORD promised to make a new covenant with the house of Israel in which he would effect a change of heart (Jer. 31:31-34). However, a covenant that has been duly established cannot simply be set aside, and remains binding until death. How then can we be released from a covenant which is binding until death to enter into a new covenant?

Do you not know, brothers – for I am speaking to men who know the law – that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies,

she is released (loosed) from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released (loosed) from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (Romans 7:1-6).

If either covenant partner should die the other is released from their covenant obligations. God made his dwelling among us in the person of Jesus the Messiah and he died in order to set us free from the law that condemned us. Just as the Law of Moses was based upon the sacrifices of the old covenant and the Levitical priesthood, the law that is written upon our hearts by the Spirit is based upon faith in the final sacrifice of Jesus for our sin and in his eternal priesthood. When we put our faith in him we too are counted as having died and been buried with him through baptism (Rom. 6:1-14). We are only released from the old covenant law if we live according to the new life of the Spirit and the law of Messiah written upon our hearts. If we live by the Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Gal. 5:16, cf. Ezek. 36:26). We cannot truly live by faith, counting ourselves as dead to the law of the old covenant, if we continue to live in obvious sin.

If the Law of Moses is removed without the reality of the law of Messiah being written upon the heart by the Spirit it would lead to complete lawlessness. How can people who are all guilty and bound over to disobedience be released (loosed) from the restraint of the law without becoming even further entrapped by sin? Those who are insincere will indeed try to turn the grace of God into a license for immorality, but God cannot be mocked. The Apostle Paul wrote: "IF you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Gal 5:18-23).

The converse of Paul's argument would be, "If you are not led by the Spirit, you are under law." The law will always condemn sinners: We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers; and for whatever

else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me (1 Tim. 1:8-11).

The grace of God, which is revealed in the enormity of what he suffered to release us from the bondage of sin, cannot be cheapened by pretenders. The elders of the church are given the authority to expose and rebuke those who turn God's grace into a licence for immorality and such offenders may be expelled from the holy assembly of true worshippers (see 1 Cor. 5:1-13). Those who truly repent of their sin and who pray according to the manner taught us by the Lord, willingly bind themselves to God's will as it is in heaven: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Some distort this authority to bind and loose as though heaven is there to do our bidding! The real meaning is the very opposite – We must willingly submit ourselves to that which has already been established in heaven. Young's Literal translation of the passage bears this out: "whatever thou mayest bind upon the earth shall be having been bound in the heavens, and whatever thou mayest loose upon the earth shall be having been loosed in the heavens." In other words the church ratifies that which has been established in heaven.

Sin leads to death and the law condemns sinners, but believers do not shrink from its sentence by undermining the law or adjusting the standard. Rather we acknowledge that we are deserving of its penalty, accepting the sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sin. Those who have "died with Christ" have nothing to fear from the law: For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin (i.e. bound to sin)– because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (Romans 6:8).

Whoever truly upholds the law, without additions or alterations, will realise that all are condemned by the law. By condemning sin the law leads us to the Messiah. If we come to him in true repentance and faith he will accomplish what the law is powerless to do. He will set us free from sin and death: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:31,36).

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Footnotes:

1. The life and times of Jesus the Messiah Ch.XXXVI.

## 2. Wars of the Jews – Book 1, Ch.5