

# Was God's Law Nailed To The Cross?

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In their struggle to find a New Testament scripture that supports their misconception that God's law is "done away," many people point to Colossians 2:14 to "prove" that Christ nailed the law of God to the cross. In fact, this verse becomes a major linchpin in their fallacious argument that Christians are not required to keep God's "harsh Old Testament law." Proponents of such a teaching say that the "handwriting of requirements [*ordinances*, KJV]" refers to the law "that was against us." They further claim that Christ "took it out of the way" or abolished the law.

Does Colossians 2:14 do away with God's law? What is "the handwriting of requirements"? What really was "nailed . . . to the cross"? Let's carefully examine this scripture to see what Paul is truly saying.

First of all, note the context. In verses 11-13, Paul explains what Christ did for us and how those who have believed in Him are now spiritually circumcised:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

Here we see that the subject under discussion is the means of our justification. Paul is saying that, when we repented and were baptized, the "old man" of sin was buried in a watery grave, and our sins were completely forgiven through our faith in the sacrifice of Christ. After being raised out of the water, we were "made alive" with Him and imputed to be righteous in God's sight. Paul refers to this process as "circumcision made without hands," that is, spiritual circumcision.

## Handwriting of Requirements

The first part of verse 14 continues the sentence begun at the end of verse 13. Paul continues to explain how our justification was accomplished. Thus, the whole sentence reads,

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us.

What was this "handwriting of requirements"? These words are translated from the Greek phrase *cheirographon tois dogmasin*. *Cheirographon* means anything written by hand, but can more specifically apply to a legal document, bond or note of debt. *Dogmasin* refers to decrees, laws or ordinances, and in this context means a body of beliefs or practices that have become the guidelines governing a person's conduct or way of life.

What Paul is saying is that, by His death, Christ has wiped out the note of guilt or debt that we owed as a result of our sins—sins which resulted from our past way of life. Before repentance, our lives had been governed by the standards and values of this present, evil world—the "decrees, laws and ordinances" of the society in which we lived.

Now that we have repented and accepted Christ, we have embarked on a new way of life and are living by God's standards and values. Consequently, God has wiped out the debt we acquired as a result of our sins and has imputed righteousness to us.

Another means of ascertaining what "handwriting of requirements" means is to notice that it restates the phrase immediately before it. "Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us" parallels "having forgiven you all trespasses." Thus, Paul could not be referring to the law itself but rather to the record of our transgression of that law—sin!

### **What Was Nailed to the Cross?**

Note also the last sentence in verse 14: "And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." In this sentence, the word "it" is a singular pronoun and refers back to the singular word "handwriting." "Requirements" could not be its antecedent because "requirements" is plural. So, some kind of handwriting—a note, a record or a citation—was affixed to the cross.

Historically, only two objects were nailed to the stake of crucifixion: 1) the condemned person and 2) an inscription naming the crimes for which he was being punished. Thus, when Jesus was crucified, only His body and Pilate's inscription ("This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"; see Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19) were nailed to the cross. Normally, the inscription would be more accusative, saying something like, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, who rebelled against Caesar." Pilate's complimentary inscription replaced the customary note or record of guilt—the "handwriting of requirements" that would have been found nailed to the crosses of the two malefactors crucified with Him.

Just before He died, when the Father forsook Him (Matthew 27:46), our sins were symbolically nailed to the cross in His body. "Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed" (I Peter 2:24). At the time of His crucifixion, Jesus Christ *became* sin for us. "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Corinthians 5:21). Our note of debt that we owed God as a result of our sins is what was "taken out of the way" and "nailed . . . to the cross."

No, it was not the law that was nailed to the cross. The law is not against us or contrary to us but is a great blessing to us. "Moreover by them [God's commandments and statutes] your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:11). Paul clearly writes in Romans 7:12, "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good."

We now see that, far from doing away with the law of God, Colossians 2:14 explains a deep and profound truth, the doctrine of justification. Paul describes the manner in which we are reckoned righteous in God's sight through faith in the sacrifice of Christ. Our Savior paid in His own body the great debt which we owed God because of our breaking of His holy and righteous laws. Now our sins have been "taken out of the way" and "nailed . . . to the cross." Having risen from that watery grave,

we now have the promise of eternal life as we live a new way of life—a life of righteousness and service to Him!