“LAWS” TREATED AS “COVENANTS”

“I am not under the law, but under grace.”

Have you ever heard that line from someone to whom you were trying to explain the Sabbath? It is used as a conversation stopper: “Sorry, but I’m no longer bound by anything the law required, including the Sabbath, now that Jesus has come and put us ‘under grace.’”

While “you are not under law but under grace” is biblical (from the last verse in our inScribe section for this lesson—Rom. 6:11–14), many people do not realize that it is not the entirety of verse 14 but simply a phrase from the verse. Our purpose in this lesson is to study this verse in its immediate and wider context.

But before we begin, we need to add another key concept to the four we noted previously (see lesson 6 inTro) that is important to keep in mind as we study this and the next two lessons especially: when Paul and the New Testament authors discuss “the law,” or “law,” they often have covenant issues in mind. So the same historical/experiential models of interpretation apply to the discussions of the law as apply to discussions of the covenants, especially when the discussions are polemical (argumentative), appearing to portray a negative attitude toward the law, and are presented through a series of contrasts, as occurs in presentations on the covenants. In each passage one must ask, “Is this referring to the law as God gave it in history and intended it to function (the historical dimension) or to the way humans have rightly or wrongly responded to God’s Law (the experiential dimension)?”
Write out Romans 6:1–23 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Romans 6:11–14. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE “UNDER LAW”/“UNDER GRACE” CONTRASTS

Romans is organized in a number of large-scale thematic units: introduction, 1:1–16; universal condemnation from birth, 1:17–3:20; basis for justification, 3:2–5:21; sanctification, 6:1–8:39; and so forth. Romans 6 also forms its own thematic unit: 6:1–10 focuses on baptism representing conversion and spiritual participation in the life and death of Jesus leading to a death to sin and a new “walk in newness of life” (v. 4, NKJV); 6:15–23 describes the life before and after baptism as a transition from being “slaves of sin” to “having been set free from sin, [being] slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17, 18, NKJV).

In between Romans 6:1–10 and 15–23 Paul summarizes this transition by labeling the former life as “under law” and the new life in Christ as “under grace.”

In verse 14 Paul clearly states that sin has dominion over you unless and until you come “under grace,” which, in the context of this chapter, happens at conversion, and in the New Testament era was symbolized by baptism. Romans is in sync with the rest of Scripture, which affirms that the transition from being destined to eternal death and eternal life is marked by conversion, no matter when or where a person was born in history. There are not different plans of salvation or different gospels in the Old Testament and New Testament. In verse 14 Paul labels life before conversion as a life “under law” and life after conversion as life “under grace.” Perhaps in this passage he means by “under law” to mean under condemnation for breaking the law, or possibly for relating to God’s law solely in a legalistic way. We do not know for certain why he gave the pre-converted life this title; we only know that in Romans 6:14 he did.

Verses 11–13 follow the same pattern in this template. In each case the contrasts he presents are stark and unambiguous: life before the transition, that is, the “under law” life, the old covenant life, shares an affinity with sin—you are “alive” to it, it has “dominion over you” and “reign[s] in your mortal body”; you “obey …its lusts”, and you “present . . . yourselves” to aide in its destructive work in the lives of others. In contrast, the life after the transition to an “under grace” life, the new covenant life, is “dead . . . to sin [and] alive to God,” does not let “sin reign in [one’s] mortal body [or] obey…its lusts” or “have dominion over you,” and “present[es oneself] to God . . . as [an] instrument of righteousness” to participate in Jesus’ mission to seek and to save the lost.

Most modern biblical commentators use Romans 6:14 to describe the historical old (Sinai) covenant as a covenant that kept people “under law” until Jesus came in history and enacted the historical new covenant which set New Testament believers free from living “under law” so that they might live “under grace.” So if you are sharing the Sabbath or the biblical health message with someone and they respond, “I am not under the law but under grace,” this is where they are coming from—they likely heard it presented that way in church.
THE CONTEXT TELLS THE STORY

If they are studied carefully and prayerfully, most scripture texts/passages will quite readily give up their meaning. Others require extra study and prayer. But there is no better interpreter than Scripture itself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The more Romans 6 is prayerfully studied, the clearer it should become that it addresses the life experience of the believer rather than the historical old and new covenants. Even the seminal death and resurrection of Jesus are not emphasized as historical events per se in 6:1–10, but are presented in terms of how they affect the life and behavior of the believer. Romans 6 does not even emphasize Jesus’ historical death and resurrection as the basis for the forgiveness of the believer’s sins, but rather speaks of it as the basis through baptism for the believer’s own personal death to sin and rising to “walk in newness of life” (v. 4). The believer’s baptismal identification with Jesus’ death and resurrection becomes the experiential transition point from living as “slaves of sin” to living as “slaves of righteousness” (vv. 17, 18). The entire chapter is experiential, not historical in nature.

This is the context for verses 11–14 in general and for verse 14’s “you are not under law but under grace” in particular. The context, as well as the specific wording of the entirety of verse 14, readily gives up its meaning as experiential, not historical, in orientation. When Paul writes in verse 14, “You are not under law,” he was not teaching that the law no longer has any application to the New Testament believer; when he writes “you are under grace,” he was teaching that at conversion you died to a life committed to a sinful lifestyle and you rose committed to live a righteous life that will honor Jesus and contribute to the expansion of His kingdom on earth. In other words, your response to the gospel in faith and a commitment to an obedience that comes from faith as God writes His law on your heart marks your transition from an old-covenant experience to a new-covenant experience, from an old-covenant person to a new-covenant believer.

Consider again the implications if verse 14 refers to the historical old and new covenants. Consult the list of contrasts on the inGest chart/slide for verses 11–14. If the left-column characterizations of the “old covenant” all applied to the Sinai covenant, then that covenant would have been designed by God to keep people “alive . . . to sin” and under sin’s “dominion” and “reign,” requiring that they obey its “lusts” and serve “wickedness”! And not until Jesus came in history could any of the benefits of living “under grace” have been experienced by anyone.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/cov08-4

*Under Law* vs. *Under Grace*
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Exodus 34:6, 7
Psalm 103:1–14; 145:8–16
Jonah 3–4
2 Timothy 1:8–10
Hebrews 4:15, 16

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Romans 6:1–23?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 6:1–23.
LIVING WITH JESUS “UNDER GRACE”

What would it mean to live “under grace”? Whatever else it might mean, it could mean nothing less than living under Jesus, the God of grace, living under the care and keeping of “the LORD, who made heaven and earth . . . [who] will not allow your foot to be moved . . . who keeps you . . . [who] shall preserve your soul” (Psalm 121:2, 3, 7, NKJV).

Jesus is the incarnation of Yahweh; whatever is said about Yahweh in the Old Testament applies to Jesus as well. Living “under grace” in the Old Testament era would mean living under the care of Him who revealed Himself as “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod. 34:6, 7). Israel’s hymnal was laced with songs of praise to their God for His loving, gracious, forgiving ways toward them (Ps. 85; 103; 111:4; 145:8).

The grace of Yahweh/Jesus so overwhelmed the Old Testament believer that Jonah used God’s grace to excuse his disobedient refusal to go to Nineveh with God’s warning message: “I fled . . . for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm” (Jonah 4:2, NKJV). While Jonah was wrong to flee his mission initially, he can be commended for affirming that God longs for all to respond to His timeless and universal appeal: “Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth” (Isa. 45:22, NKJV)! Though Jonah proclaimed Nineveh’s doom, the Holy Spirit enabled the Ninevites to interpret God’s warning as a loving appeal to repent and be saved. Wicked Nineveh responded and, for at least a period of their history, lived “under grace” (Jonah 3–4). Living “under grace” was never an exclusively New Testament experience.

When Jesus came to earth, Paul declared that “the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all” (Titus 2:11, NKJV). But God’s grace did not begin in the New Testament era. John wrote that Jesus’ appearance and mission added “grace upon grace” to the Old Testament revelation and experience of God’s grace (John 1:16, NASB). Paul referred to the gospel variously as “the grace of Christ,” “the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6, 7); “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24); “The gospel . . . of grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim. 1:8, 9, NKJV, emphasis supplied). In other words, “the gospel of grace” revealed progressively in God’s covenant(s) throughout the Old Testament era and in its fullest expression when Jesus came in history, existed in the heart and councils of the Trinity “before time began.” Thus, Ellen White could write, “The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant” (The Faith I Live By, 77).

Every day of our lives, Jesus invites us anew to experience the wonder, the security, and the adventure of that grace! “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16, NKJV). That “throne of grace” is Jesus’ throne. That “time of need” is every day. The result is a life lived “under grace” that makes a difference for the kingdom of God for eternity.
AMAZING GRACE

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Through faith, irrespective of feeling, Jesus, the Author of our salvation, the Finisher of our faith, will, by His precious grace, strengthen the moral powers, and the sinner may reckon himself ‘to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ.’ Simple faith, with the love of Christ in the soul, unites the believer to God.” (Ellen G. White, Lift Him Up, 369.)

“Those who trust wholly in the righteousness of Christ, looking to Him in living faith, know the Spirit of Christ and are known of Christ. Simple faith enables the believer to reckon himself dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We are saved by grace through our faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God.” (White, Faith and Works, 91.)

“When the Christian takes his baptismal vow, divine help is pledged to him. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit stand ready to work in his behalf. God places at his command the resources of heaven, that he may be an overcomer. His own power is small; but God is omnipotent, and God is his helper. Daily he is to make known his wants at the throne of grace. By faith and trust, by availing himself of the resources provided, he can be more than a conqueror.” (White, Our High Calling, 157.)

“The grace given cost Heaven a price it is impossible for us to measure. That grace is our choicest treasure, and Christ means that it shall be communicated through us. It is sacred, in the name of Jesus, to the saving of the soul. It is the revealing of the honor of God, an unfolding of His glory.” (White, In Heavenly Places, 220.)

“Divine grace is the great element of saving power; without it all human effort is unavailing.” (White, Evangelism, 629.)

“The sin which is indulged to the greatest extent, and which separates us from God and produces so many contagious spiritual disorders, is selfishness. There can be no returning to the Lord except by self-denial. Of ourselves we can do nothing; but, through God strengthening us, we can live to do good to others, and in this way shun the evil of selfishness. We need not go to heathen lands to manifest our desire to devote all to God in a useful, unselfish life. We should do this in the home circle, in the church, among those with whom we associate and with whom we do business. Right in the common walks of life is where self is to be denied and kept in subordination.” (White, Testimonies for the Church, 2:132.)

“The Holy Spirit will be given to those who seek for its power and grace and will help our infirmities when we would have an audience with God. Heaven is open to our petitions, and we are invited to come “boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). We are to come in faith, believing that we shall obtain the very things we ask of Him.” (White, God’s Amazing Grace, 217.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How has there been dissonance between the Old and Testaments in your mind?

Why is understanding the Testaments as contradictory so perilous?

Have has understanding the Testaments as noncontradictory raised your trust in the Bible and in God?

If you were discussing Rom 6:14 with someone, how could this week’s chart be helpful?

How do you understand the “Law” differently now?

How does this study bring change in how you understand Romans 6:14’s phrase, “you are not under law but under grace?”

What does living under grace mean to you?

How can we experience the wonder, the security, and the adventure of Christ’s grace daily?

“Under Law” vs. “Under Grace”