

What Was Nailed to the Cross?

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Many church-goers claim that the Ten Commandments were “nailed to the cross.” Yet, is that what your Bible teaches? Don’t be too sure!

There is only *one* scripture in the entire Bible which speaks of something being “nailed to the cross.” That scripture was written by the Apostle Paul.

Contrary to what many people believe, Paul was *not*—in any way—*against* God’s spiritual law. In fact, there are a great *many* scriptures written by Paul that *endorse* the keeping of God’s spiritual law! Therefore, it would have been totally *contrary* to those *numerous* scriptures—as well as contrary to the writings of the other disciples, *and* contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ—if Paul *had* stated that the law or the Ten Commandments were “nailed to the cross.”

Let’s now look at that *one* scripture, and see what Paul said: “And you, being dead [i.e., ‘**When** you were dead’—*NASB*] 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. And He has taken it out of the way, having **nailed it to the cross**” (Col. 2: 13-14).

First of all, *what is* this “handwriting of requirements” that Christ “wiped out” and “nailed to the cross”? Whereas the *NKJV* refers to it as “handwriting of **requirements**,” the *KJV* calls it “the handwriting of **ordinances**.” So, from that alone, it is not clear *what* Paul is referring to.

The 1984 edition of the *NIV*, however, makes it clear what *they* (erroneously) think that this scripture is referring to—as they render it as follows: “having **canceled the written code, with its regulations...**” So, plainly, the 1984 *NIV* is saying that this scripture means that God’s **law** was nailed to the cross! In fact, that *error* of the *NIV* is expressed even more plainly in the 1995 *New International Reader’s Version*—where they render it as: “He [Christ] wiped out the **written Law with its rules**. The **Law** was against us. It opposed us. He took it [the Law] away and nailed it to the cross.” (See “Note #1” at the end of this article.)

Yet, how could that *possibly* be the meaning of what Paul was saying, when we consider the *abundance* of scriptures written by Paul which strongly *endorse* the keeping of God’s law?! Such a tremendous *contradiction* in Paul’s teaching would be unthinkable!

That passage in Colossians is *not* referring to God’s law. In fact, the Greek word for “law”—*nomos*—does not occur *one single time* in the entire book of Colossians! Furthermore, the book of Colossians doesn’t contain one single quote *from* the Old Testament—which is *further* evidence that the issue being addressed in Colossians is *not* God’s law!

The key to understanding this verse is to first understand the phrase “the handwriting of ordinances,” which is translated from the Greek phrase “cheirographon tois dogmasin.” That

phrase would be *better* translated as “the record (or catalogue) of our sins” — i.e., the “notes of guilt” that are against us.

An *analogy* of “notes of guilt” would be the notes or records that are written against a person when he is found guilty of breaking *man’s* law. Yes, just as “notes of guilt” are written against us when we break man’s law, likewise “notes of guilt” (or “records of our sins”) are recorded against us when we break *God’s* law.

In the book *International Critical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians*, it is stated on page 254 that the Greek word “cheirographon” means “...properly an autograph, [and] was in later Greek a technical term for **a written acknowledgement of debt.**” Furthermore, “the entire [aforementioned Greek] phrase is taken from a Greek idiom that refers to **a handwritten bill of debt, based upon laws or teachings.**”¹

Now, do you and I **have** a “debt” that needs wiping out? Indeed we do! Christ plainly *compared* the following two things: (1) our need to have our sins (“our debts”) forgiven by God, and (2) someone’s need of having a huge *financial* debt forgiven (Matt. 18: 23-35). In that passage of scripture, a servant owed his master an enormous financial debt, which he was unable to pay. Upon pleading for mercy, the master had compassion and forgave the debt.

Yet, the forgiven man later refused to forgive a *much smaller* financial debt which someone owed him. So, the master then said to the servant: “...‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that **debt** because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. **So My heavenly Father also will do to you** if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (verses 32-35).

Plainly, if *we* don’t forgive *others*, then God won’t forgive us *our debt* that we have incurred due to our sins!

Likewise, in Matthew chapter 6, Christ instructs us to *pray* that God will “forgive us our **debts**, as we forgive our debtors” (verse 12).

Now, what *is* the debt we owe? What is the penalty we earn whenever we sin? *Death* is the penalty that we earn when we sin! (Rom. 6:23). Yet, for all who truly repent and accept Christ, His Sacrifice *pays* for our sins—*pays* our debt! Our debt is “wiped out.”

When Paul spoke, in Col. 2:14, of something being “against us,” he was referring to these “notes of guilt”—this “catalogue of our sins”—being against us. God’s *law* is **not** “against us”! God’s spiritual law is for our benefit!

Consider also that this Greek word “cheirographon” is found only *once* in the Bible. And, when there’s only one usage of a term, it’s impossible to make a *comparative* analysis of its meaning. Yet, *recent* research has examined the usage of this Greek word in literature *other than* the Bible—but of the *same* time period.²

In the book *Apocalypse of Isaiah* (as well as *other* works of literature of that time period) the term “cheirographon” is used to refer to the “**record book of sin.**” So, here again, the phrase in question refers to “our record of sin.” It does *not* refer to the Ten Commandments *or* to God’s law.

Yes, it was our “record of sin” — our “notes of guilt” — that was nailed to the cross.

In *The Ryrie Study Bible*, the following explanation is given in a footnote for Col. 2:14— “*handwriting of requirements* = a certificate or acknowledgement of debt in the handwriting of the debtor. The Mosaic law (which Paul’s phrase symbolizes) put us *in debt to God with sin*; this *debt* He has canceled by nailing it to the cross of Christ. Christ has made full payment.” (*The Ryrie Study Bible, NKJV*, Moody Press, 1985)

Finally, consider one particular Bible translation of Col. 2:14, which makes the meaning much more clear *than* the renderings in the *KJV* and the *NKJV* and the 1984 *NIV*: “having **canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us** and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (*New International Version*, 2011 edition).

In Conclusion

Paul *repeatedly* taught **adherence** to God’s spiritual law. Accordingly—and, as corroborated by new evidence—Paul was *not* saying that God’s law *or* the Ten Commandments was nailed to the cross! Rather, he was saying that the “record of our debt” — our “notes of guilt” is what was nailed to the cross!

Note #1: Regarding the *erroneous* translation of Col. 2: 14 by the 1984 *NIV*: That erroneous translation was *corrected* in the 2011 *NIV*. That more recent edition of the *NIV* renders the scripture as follows: “...He forgave us all our sins, having **canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us**; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2: 13-14).

References

1. *Tomorrow’s World Bible Study Course*, Lesson Ten, Dec. 2000, p. 9
2. information from Dr. Samuel Bacchiocchi (Professor of Church History and Theology at Andrews University in Michigan), from the article “What Was Nailed to the Cross?” *The World Ahead* magazine, March 1996, p. 16