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MINISTRIES

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The Works of the Flesh and the Law of Moses (Galatians 5:16-24)

NOTE: This teaching briefly covers several topics that may not be appropriate for children. Viewer discretion is advised.

In Galatians 5, Paul gives an exhortation to the Galatian church. He tells them that they should walk by the spirit, and not gratify the desires of the flesh. He goes on to provide a list of things that he calls “[the works of the flesh](#),” followed by another list that he calls, “[the fruit of the spirit](#).” He tells believers to avoid the works of the flesh, and to produce the fruit of the spirit.

This passage is very well-known, and it is very edifying and inspiring. It draws a clear and concise line between good and bad behavior. It is one of my favorite parts of the Bible. Paul’s writing in this passage encapsulates so much of Christian morality in just a few sentences. Given how famous this passage is, it might surprise you to know that the ideas in this passage come directly from the law of Moses.

The reason this may be surprising is because many people think that Paul was against the law of Moses. Some people think that obeying the law of Moses is contrary to having faith in Christ. If that’s the case, it would be very strange for Paul to promote obeying the law of Moses in Galatians 5. But, as we will see, that’s exactly what he does. Every “[work of the flesh](#)” is something that the law of Moses prohibited thousands of years before Paul wrote to the Galatians. In this teaching, we’re going to show the evidence for that. We will see which parts of the law of Moses describe the works of the flesh from Galatians 5.

Let’s start by reading the passage:

Galatians 5:16-24

[But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control;](#)

against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

There is a lot of information packed into this passage. Paul tells us that the spirit and the flesh are opposed to each other. He says that those who do “the works of the flesh” will not inherit the kingdom of God, and that those who belong to Christ have “crucified” the flesh. Christians, Paul says, fulfill the desires of the Spirit, not the desires of the flesh.

This passage also gives us concrete examples of the differences between the flesh and the spirit. Paul gives a list of behaviors that are evidence of the desires of the flesh, and another list of behaviors that are evidence of the desires of the spirit. We can know whether our desires align with the flesh or the spirit by seeing where those desires lead. Do our desires result in the things that Paul calls the works of the flesh, or do they result in the fruit of the spirit? This list of concrete differences between the flesh and the spirit is very practical and useful. We can compare our actions to the items on this list, and see where our heart needs to be changed in order to align with God’s spirit. For example, if we see our brother receive a great blessing and we desire to rejoice with him (Romans 12:15), then we know that our desire aligns with God’s spirit, because “joy” is one of the fruits of the spirit. On the other hand, if we see our brother receive a great blessing, and we desire that he should lose that blessing, or that he should suffer, then we know that our desire aligns with the flesh, because “envy” is one of the works of the flesh. This list helps us know where our heart needs correction. We can use this knowledge to take steps, with God’s help, to align ourselves with God’s spirit. So, Paul’s list of works in this passage is very useful, and very practical for our spiritual walk.

As we mentioned earlier, Paul did not invent this list on his own. The “[works of the flesh](#)” are all prohibited by the law of Moses. In Hebrew, the law of Moses is called the Torah, but we usually know it as the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In this teaching, we’re going to use the terms “law” and “Torah” interchangeably. Let’s look at the works of the flesh, and let’s see where those works are described in the Torah.

The Works of the Flesh in the Law of Moses

The first two works of the flesh are “[sexual immorality](#)” and “[impurity](#)” (Galatians 5:19). “[Sexual immorality](#)” is actually a translation of two Greek words, one which means, “adultery,” and one which means, “fornication.” “Adultery” is sleeping with another man’s wife, and that is indeed prohibited by the Torah, as we can see:

Exodus 20:14

[You shall not commit adultery.](#)

Leviticus 20:10

[If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.](#)

So far, we’re one-for-one. The first work of the flesh, adultery, comes straight from the Torah. The next two, *fornication* and *impurity*, are also sexual sins, and they are also prohibited by the Torah. *Fornication* means sleeping with an unmarried woman, and the Torah prohibits that as well:

Exodus 22:16-17

If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

Some people think that this part of the Torah is not a prohibition, but a loophole that allows people to pay for sex, but this is not the case. The “bride price for virgins” was many years’ worth of wages (see Genesis 29:18-20). The man in this verse is not hiring a prostitute, but he is in fact paying a very steep fine for his crime. Fornication is prohibited by the law of Moses.

The next work of the flesh, “[impurity](#),” is a specific kind of sexual immorality, a form of incest. We find this in the Torah as well:

Leviticus 20:21

If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity [*niddah*]. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

This word for “impurity” is also used in another verse, speaking of another kind of forbidden sexual intercourse:

Leviticus 18:19

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness [*niddah*].

So far, we’ve had three works of the flesh, and three commands from the Torah that prohibit those works. All of these “works of the flesh” have come directly from God’s law. But let’s keep reading and see if that pattern continues.

The next work of the flesh is “[sensuality](#)” (Galatians 5:19). Sensuality means to act on our desires—our “senses,” if you will—with no regard for whether our actions are right or wrong. This is how Eve acted in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3, when she saw that the forbidden fruit was “a delight to the eyes,” and that the tree was “to be desired” (Genesis 3:6). God had specifically said not to eat the fruit, but Eve obeyed those delights and desires, her “senses” about the tree, instead of obeying God’s word. Acting like this is also prohibited in the Torah:

Deuteronomy 5:21

And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.’

The words for “covet” and “desire” are the same words used for “delight” and “desire” in Genesis 3. This command means that we must restrain our desires. We cannot just follow our passions and take whatever we want from our neighbor. We must control our passions, and do what is right, even when our sensual desires are telling us to do wrong. So, this “[work of the flesh](#)” was also described and defined in the Torah. Paul didn’t make it up himself; he got it from the law of God.

The next work of the flesh is “[idolatry](#)” (Galatians 5:20). The law of Moses prohibits idolatry in many places. Here, we’ll show two of them:

Exodus 20:4-5

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...

Leviticus 19:4

Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves any gods of cast metal: I am the LORD [YHWH] your God.

The next work of the flesh is “**sorcery**” (Galatians 5:20). Sorcery is the use of magical rituals to summon the power of pagan gods (see Eugene Tavenner, *Studies in Magic from Latin Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press 1916], pp. 6-7). Sorcery is prohibited by the law of Moses in two places:

Exodus 22:18

You shall not permit a sorceress to live.

Deuteronomy 18:10

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer.

The next work of the flesh is “**enmity**” (Galatians 5:20). Enmity means intense hatred—the kind of hatred that can lead to murder. This kind of hatred is expressly prohibited by the law of Moses:

Numbers 35:20-21

And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer.

The next work of the flesh is “**strife**” (Galatians 5:20). This word is frequently used along with the next work of the flesh, “**jealousy**” (Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 3:3-4; 12:20-21). It is also associated with “selfish ambition” (James 3:14), which is a work of the flesh mentioned a bit later. Paul uses this Greek word for “**strife**” elsewhere to refer to promoting false doctrines. It seems to describe strife between competing ministers:

Philippians 1:15-17

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and **rivalry**, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

1 Timothy 6:3-5

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua] and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for **quarrels** about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

(see also: 1 Corinthians 1:10-12; Titus 3:9)

Paul says that strife comes when selfish and jealous people teach “different doctrine” that conflicts with the word of God. As we might expect by this point, Paul gets this idea directly from the law of Moses:

Deuteronomy 4:2

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD [YHWH] your God that I command you.

Deuteronomy 12:32

Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

A person cannot make his own “word of God” and create strife because he is jealous of God’s true prophets. This is commanded in the law of Moses, and Paul repeats it when he condemns “strife” and “jealousy” in Galatians.

The next work of the flesh is “fits of anger” (Galatians 5:20). Paul here is not talking about feeling upset; he is talking about the kind of anger that the Bible typically describes, which is a violent and vengeful anger. God in his “anger” brings just punishment upon the wicked; for example:

Micah 5:15

And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.

(see also Ezekiel 25:14; Isaiah 63:3-4).

God enacts vengeance in his anger, but we are not supposed to do the same. It is God’s role to provide vengeance, not ours. As David wrote:

Psalms 37:7-9

Be still before the LORD [YHWH] and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD [YHWH] shall inherit the land.

Both Paul and David got their ideas about anger and vengeance from the law of Moses. The Torah says that we should not avenge ourselves in our anger, but that we should leave wrath and vengeance to God.

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD [YHWH].

(see also: Romans 12:19)

When Paul tells us to avoid “fits of anger,” he is not saying anything new, but he is again telling us to adhere to the law of Moses.

The next work of the flesh is “rivalries” (Galatians 5:20). This word is translated “selfish ambition” in many other places (e.g. Philippians 1:17; James 3:16). It is connected to the terms “strife” and “jealousy” that we mentioned before, and it is prohibited by the same Torah commands that prohibit those things. The Torah even has a whole chapter about this, in Numbers 16, where the rebellion of

Korah is described. Korah was a Levite who thought that he would be a better leader than Moses or Aaron, and God showed in no uncertain terms that Korah should not have created such strife and rivalry. The point is that a person cannot, in his selfish ambition, create his own religion and claim to speak for God—he cannot establish his own word as a rival to God’s word. Again, the Torah already prohibits this, and Paul is simply repeating the idea in Galatians 5.

The next work of the flesh is “**dissensions**” (Galatians 5:20). This comes from a Greek word meaning “to stand.” It is frequently associated with protests, “standing” against someone who is powerful. Sometimes, it is good to stand against someone who is abusing his power, like what Moses did when he protected the daughters of the priest of Midian:

Exodus 2:16-17

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses **stood up** and saved them, and watered their flock.

Standing against injustice and wickedness is good; but standing against justice and righteousness is bad, and that is what Paul is condemning when he warns against “**dissensions**.” It is also what Moses condemns in several places in the law, when he says not to stand against one’s brother:

Leviticus 19:16

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not **stand up** against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD [YHWH].

Deuteronomy 19:16-19

If a malicious witness **arises** to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD [YHWH], before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

So far, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, and dissensions have all been things prohibited by God’s law. These are things that were prohibited by the law of Moses, and that Paul says are prohibited as well. It is sure looking like Paul got his standards for sin directly from God’s law. But, let’s keep going.

The next work of the flesh is “**divisions**” (Galatians 5:20). This comes from the Greek word *airesis*, which is where we get the word “heresy” from. Peter uses this same word referring to false prophets:

2 Peter 2:1

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive **heresies**, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

As we should expect by now, false prophets are also condemned in the law of Moses.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which

you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD [YHWH] your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD [YHWH] your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD [YHWH] your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD [YHWH] your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD [YHWH] your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

The next work of the flesh is “[envy](#)” (Galatians 5:21). Envy means hating a person because of what he has. Envy is what Joseph’s brothers felt because Joseph had his father’s love:

Genesis 37:3-4

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

The Torah tells us *not* to envy and hate our brother:

Leviticus 19:17-18

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD [YHWH].

The Torah also tells us not to do the things that result from envy and hate. Joseph’s brothers, because of their envy and hatred of Joseph, ended up capturing him and selling him into slavery. The Torah explicitly prohibits doing this, just like it prohibits the feelings that lead to it:

Deuteronomy 24:7

If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

The next work of the flesh is “[drunkenness](#)” (Galatians 5:21). The Torah does not have any specific laws against drunkenness, except that it prohibits the priests from drinking while they are serving in the tabernacle (Leviticus 10:8-11). We cover this in our teaching, [Does the Bible Permit Drinking Alcohol?](#)

So, did Paul make this one up? Well, no. What Paul probably has in mind here is the combination of drunkenness with the next work of the flesh, “[orgies](#).” “Orgies” and “drunkenness” are always mentioned together in the New Testament (cf. Romans 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3), and that is likely because of the drinking parties that wealthy Romans of the first century sometimes held. These parties, called *comissatio*, involved entertainment, excessive drinking (Catullus 27; Damien Martin, *When to Say When: Wine and Drunkenness in Roman Society*, University of Missouri, May 2010, pp. 11-12) and sometimes the companionship of prostitutes or other illegitimate sexual partners (Titus Petronius *Satyricon* 79; Cicero *The Defense of Caelius* 15; Athenaus *Deipnosophistae* 5). The alcohol was used in order to make the people involved more willing to engage in the promiscuity. These parties were also typically held in honor of the Roman gods (Horace *Odes* 3.28; Damien Martin, *When to Say When: Wine and Drunkenness in Roman Society*, University of Missouri, May 2010, p. 8). When Paul mentions “[drunkenness](#)” here alongside “[orgies](#),” he probably has these drinking parties in mind.

So, then, does the Torah prohibit drunken festivities that involve the honor of other gods and prostitution? It does indeed. The Torah prohibits the worship of other gods, prostitution, and the parties that include these things:

Exodus 23:24

you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.

Leviticus 19:29

Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land fall into prostitution and the land become full of depravity.

Numbers 25:1-5

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD [YHWH] was kindled against Israel. And the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD [YHWH], that the fierce anger of the LORD [YHWH] may turn away from Israel.” And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.”

These “feasts” involved promiscuity, as we see from the word “whore” in verse 1, as well as some evidence from later verses (Numbers 25:6-8; 31:15-17). They were not exactly the same as the Roman *comissatio*, but they included many of the same elements, and they were prohibited. So, the drunken orgies in Galatians 5 are yet another “work of the flesh” that is defined and prohibited by the law of Moses.

Now that we’ve gone through the whole list, we can see that every item that Paul calls a “work of the flesh” is explicitly prohibited by the Torah. The Torah was the standard that Paul used to determine what the “works of the flesh” were. Someone who breaks the Torah is performing the “works of the flesh.” Paul also says this exact thing in Romans:

Romans 8:7

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

The fleshly mind performs the works of the flesh, all of which are contrary to God’s law. If we want to know what the works of the flesh are, we don’t have to look any further than the law of God. The law tells us what kind of works are produced by the fleshly mind. We can use the law to teach us and correct us, to train ourselves to do what God wants us to do. This is perhaps to be expected, since the Torah is part of Scripture, and as Paul wrote to Timothy:

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Now, if Paul in Galatians 5 is using the Torah to define what the sinful works of the flesh are, and he is telling the Galatians that they should refrain from these works of the flesh, it sure looks like he’s telling

the Galatians to keep the Torah. But, if he is, why does he say this in verse 18:

Galatians 5:18

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

How can Paul say that you are not bound by the law, but then go on to say that you should avoid the works of the flesh, which are all prohibited by the law? Isn't avoiding the works of the flesh and keeping the law the same thing?

Well, yes, it is. When Paul says, “**you are not under the law**,” he does not mean that you are not obligated to keep the law. He means that you are not under the punishment of the law (see Todd Wilson, *Galatians: Gospel-Rooted Living* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013], pp. 199-200). Why are you not under the punishment of the law? Because you are led by the spirit.

The next question is, why is a spirit-led person not under the punishment of the law? This is answered a few verses later. After Paul describes the fruit of the spirit, he says something very important:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Someone who is led by the spirit produces the fruit of the spirit; they act in love, joy, peace, and so on. There is no law against acting according to the spirit; in other words, someone who is led by the spirit does not violate the law. That is why the person who is led by the spirit is not under the law's punishment. The law only prescribes punishment for someone who violates it. If a person is led by the spirit, then he is not violating the law. In fact, he is keeping the law. If we return to Romans 8, we see this exact same idea:

Romans 8:1-8

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua]. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Paul says here that those who live according to the spirit fulfill the righteous requirement of the law. They do not have any condemnation. Those who live according to the flesh, however, do not submit to God's law. They are condemned to death. When he says that we have been set free from “**the law of sin and death**,” he does not mean that we have been set free from the requirement to keep the law; he means that we have been set free from sin, which is punished by death. When we receive the spirit, Christ sets us free from sin and death, and empowers us to keep the law. The spirit guides our actions, and it causes us to do righteous things that please God, rather than sinful things that offend him. This very thing was prophesied in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:27

And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

(see also: Ezekiel 11:19-20; Zechariah 7:8-12)

When God puts his spirit in us, it causes us to keep his law. We produce the fruit of the spirit, against which there is no law. We no longer walk in the works of the flesh, all of which are against the law. The spirit and the law are in agreement. They are both against the flesh, which is sin. We should “crucify” our flesh (Galatians 5:24), meaning we should give up our unlawful desires. We should not follow the flesh, whose works are against the law, but we should follow the spirit, which is not against the law.

If you haven’t heard any of this before, then you likely have questions about many other passages from the Bible. Perhaps Galatians 5 does not preach against the law of Moses, but don’t other verses make it clear that Christians are under a different law? A new covenant? Wasn’t the law of Moses only given to the Jews of his day?

Our ministry has many teachings that address these questions. In particular, we recommend our teaching series, [The Pauline Paradox](#), which explains many of the words in Paul’s letters that people interpret to be against the law. More importantly, though, we recommend that you search the Scriptures and test everything. There are many man-made doctrines about what the Bible means and what God wants. But the Scriptures are God’s own word. What do they say? And, what do they *not* say? Does God say that his law is temporary, or does he say that it is eternal? Does he say that his law will be established forever, or that it will be abolished? Does God ever say that his law has changed? That it has been replaced? We encourage you to search the Scriptures and find out.

In conclusion, Paul in Galatians 5 teaches that we should avoid the works of the flesh, which are all things that are prohibited by the law of Moses. He says that we should, instead, produce the fruit of the spirit, “against which there is no law.” If we set our mind on the flesh and live by the flesh, then we will violate the law, and will fall under the law’s punishment. But, when we are led by the spirit and set our mind on the things of the spirit, we will keep the law and we will not be under the law’s punishment. Our fleshly mind will lead us to break God’s law, but God’s spirit will lead us to keep God’s law. Those who belong to Christ will crucify the flesh, and live by the spirit instead.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

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Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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