

# INTRODUCING.....THE LAW OF MOSES

## The Pilgrim's Guide to the Bible

No. 10

### Is the Law of the Pentateuch still valid for Christians today?

The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, are known collectively as the Books of the Law, although, of course, they also contain much other material, and many graphic stories as well. But God's Law for His people is the main focus of these books. The law is given to Moses within the context of the story of the formation of the nation of Israel. The Book of Leviticus, in particular, reads as a rule book – a series of rules and instructions primarily concerned with the daily worship of the people in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple. Much of this law has been superseded by the New Covenant. So why is this information in our Bible, and what relevance does it have to us, the children of the New Covenant?

The Law was given by God to Moses and provided the guiding principles of the Jewish faith. We know that we, as Christians, are children of the New Covenant. We are not saved through blind obedience to the Law. We are saved by grace – the free gift of God's love, freely bestowed upon us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – God Himself assuming human form and paying the price for our sin.

So, is that the end of the matter? We are no longer subject to the Law, but have become new creations, through the blood of Jesus, shed for us. Therefore the Law of the Moses is no longer valid?

Of course, in the final analysis, this is true. So why, then, do we read the Old Testament? What is the purpose of the Law of Moses?

Paul addresses this question when he writes to the Galatians.

Paul reminds us that no one can be 'justified' by the Law, because none of us are perfect. However hard we may try to keep the Law, we are bound to fail.

*"For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do*

*them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:10 – 14)*

So is the Law of Moses restrictive and out of date? Many people see it as binding and hemming them in at every side, and as having no place in the life of freedom that Christ gives us.

And yet, the law of God was, and is, an expression of love. The Jewish people call the law "Torah" - and Torah literally means "guidance" or "help". That is what the law is meant to be for us - a guide or a help to us as we seek to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Paul goes on to say that the Law was given ‘*because of transgressions*’ (Galatians 3:19). These laws are not intended as a straitjacket, but recognise that as people, we need a moral framework in which to live. Not only does this provide a secure basis for building a society, it also offers the individual a sense of peace and reassurance about how best to live our lives.

But the Law can never provide all the answers. The stark reality is that sin will always be a part of our human experience. So what then, can be a final solution for sin? Paul reminds us that the Law is good, as far as it goes, but that God has provided a permanent solution for sin by sending Jesus to die on the cross.

*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave<sup>Ⓜ</sup> nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:23-29)*

We read the books of Law in order to understand that although we need a law by which to live, it can never completely restore us to a perfect relationship with God, or indeed with one another. It is only when we recognise that the consequences of human sin are finally resolved through faith in Christ Jesus that we can understand that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law.

## **What is in the Law of Moses?**

The OT. contains over 600 commandments, binding upon the people of Israel.

At the heart of the law are the Ten Commandments – the ‘Top Ten’ laws. They all deal with relationships – our relationship with God, and also our relationships with other people (*See The Pilgrim’s Guide to the Bible no. 6*).

The value of these ten laws can be appreciated from the fact that they form the bedrock of any civilised society. They remind us that as the people of God, we are answerable to a higher authority than any mere human institution. Life is not about the selfish pursuit of gain, but about honouring God, recognising that He has given us the gift of life, and that in order to get the best out of it, we should live in the way that recognises His higher purposes. This includes living as responsible members of society, in relationship to each other, caring for one another. These commands offer a base line for ensuring a society that can be built upon a foundation of trust and mutual respect. So within the Law, we do see a specific concern for the needs of the poorer members of society. This is often presented as a concern for widows and orphans – in early societies these being the two groups, having no bread-winning to support them, were most likely to be in physical need.

But the law, of course, refers to more than just these top ten commands. It is about that part of the Bible between Exodus chapter 20 and the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the majority of which is legal formulation. And that leaves us with the question - how should we understand it? Do these laws still apply to us, or have they been superseded? And if they do apply to us, how can we possibly keep them? Many of them seem to belong to a time and culture that is far removed from us today, and deal with a type of worship that bears little relevance to present day, Christian worship. For one thing, we are not members of the Hebrew nation. We are the children of a new covenant - saved through faith in Jesus Christ. We are not called to worship in the Temple, in fact there is no longer a Temple in existence where we can go to make animal sacrifices. And even if we did, we would probably be arrested for cruelty to animals!

If, on the other hand, we are not supposed to keep this OT Law, why did Jesus say *'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished'*? (*Matthew 5:18*)

### **The following guidelines may help:**

- The Old Testament law is a covenant: a binding contract between two parties, both of whom have obligations towards each other. In Old Testament times, covenants were made between powerful overlords, and their subjects (vassals). They guaranteed the vassals benefits and protection, but the vassal was obligated to be loyal to his master, with the threat of punishment for disloyalty. Normally, there were certain rules of behaviour specified in the covenant. The OT covenant is similar in form to other ancient covenants, and constitutes a binding agreement between God: Yahweh, the Lord, and his vassal: Israel. In return for the benefits of protection, Israel was expected to keep the 613 commandments of the covenant.

- The Old Testament is not our Testament. Testament is another word for covenant. The OT represents a covenant, which has been superseded. We are no longer obligated by it. Its commandments are not automatically binding upon us, unless the New Covenant specifically renews them. (e.g. *You are no longer under law, but under the grace of God. Romans 6:14*).
- The OT law is valid on us only where it has been re-stated in the NT. There have been changes between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. God expects us to demonstrate different evidences of obedience and loyalty from those of the OT Israelites. The OT sacrificial system has been superseded by a different kind of sacrifice - no longer a ritualised form of animal sacrifice, but, as the Book of Psalms states, God looks upon the heart of his people. *'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, O God, will not despise' (Psalm 51)*.
- Some stipulations of the Old Covenant have not been renewed in the New Covenant. There are essentially two categories of law in the OT: civil laws and ritual laws. Civil laws apply penalties for various crimes applicable to ancient Israel. They provide a framework for the safe ordering of society, the most obvious example being the Ten Commandments themselves. Many of these laws are re-stated in the New Covenant. Ritual laws provided explicit instructions on how to practice worship: e.g. priestly responsibilities, Temple worship, animal sacrifice. The new covenant does not renew most of these laws.
- It is possible for new covenants to be drawn up to replace older covenants, which are similar in style but different in content.
- But, didn't Jesus say that we are still under the Law? What he actually said was that the Law cannot be changed (*Luke 16:16-17*). Either, we keep the old law (which being human and sinful we will fail to do), or else we are granted the privilege and benefit of the new law, offered to us by Jesus. This new law, the law of love, completes what the old law could never achieve.
- Parts of the Old Covenant are renewed in the New. Some aspects of the OT ethical law are re-stated as being applicable to Christians. The laws that continue to have value derive their applicability from the fact that they support the two basic laws of the New Covenant: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind' and 'love your neighbour as yourself'* (*Matthew 22: 37 - 40*). Jesus offers us examples of how these new laws are to be applied in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew chapters 5 - 7. So some aspects of the old law are still applicable to the new law.
- All of the Old Testament is still the **word** of God, even though it may no longer be the **command** of God. The Bible contains all sorts of commands that God wants us to know about, even if they are not directed at us, personally. The Law of Moses is a part of the history of the story of salvation. It was given to be valid until Christ came into the world (*Gal 3:19-23*). It demonstrates how high God's standards are, and how impossible it is for anyone to meet those standards without divine aid. Neither the Israelites of old, nor we today can

fully obey the Law - we depend upon God's mercy and grace to help us.

- Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered to be a part of the New Testament "law of Christ". Included in this category are the Ten Commandments, and the two great commandments of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 (as quoted by Jesus in Matthew 22:37 - 40).

## **So what was the value of the law in the Old Testament?**

From what has been said, it is apparent that the law, in itself, is insufficient to bring anyone to salvation. No human can keep it in its entirety. St Paul reminds us of the inadequacy of the law. *'No one is justified before God by the law, because "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith.'* (Galatians 3:11-12). Yet the law was of benefit to Israel and stands as part of the story of God's dealings with His people. We have in the law, a prelude to God's ultimate work of salvation through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

## **But what about the difficult passages of the law?**

Although we can understand that the law of Moses is a part of God's big plan for the world, and that it stands as a prelude to the establishment of the New Covenant by Jesus Christ, there are many of the actual laws which seem to serve no real purpose, or at best appear to be somewhat arbitrary. Why did God give these laws?

Note the following examples:

### **The food laws**

*Lev 11:7 - 'The pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed, but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you.'*

Such a law is not intended as an arbitrary restriction on Jewish eating habits. Rather, it had a protective purpose. The majority of prohibited foods were ones which were either most likely to carry disease in the hot climate of the Sinai peninsula, were uneconomic to raise, or were favoured for religious sacrifice to pagan gods by the nations surrounding the Israelites, and therefore, better left alone, as their use may have been misunderstood. The food laws served to prevent various allergies, illnesses and spiritual disobedience.

### **Laws about the shedding of blood.**

*E.g. Exodus 29:10-12 'Bring the bull to the front of the tent of meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it in the LORD's presence at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Take some of the bull's blood and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and pour out the rest of it at the base of the altar.'*

Such laws helped to set important standards for Israel. They demonstrated the importance of sin, and the need for a punishment. Sin merits death. But through animal sacrifice, the people learned that an animal could be substituted for a person. This paved the way for the understanding of the death of Christ - as a substitute for our own deaths. Animal sacrifice seems barbaric to us, in our culture, but for the Jews of ancient Israel, 3,500 years ago, it was a sign of God's mercy, in that an animal could be substituted for a human.

## **Unusual prohibitions**

*Eg. "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." (Deuteronomy 14:21).*

*Do not wear clothing woven from two kinds of material. (Leviticus 19:19).*

There do seem to be examples of laws which are quite arbitrary and serve no particular purpose. Normally, such laws were intended to prevent the Jews from engaging in the fertility cult practices of the Canaanites. The Canaanites followed what is best described as 'cult magic', i.e. boiling a goat in its mother's milk was supposed to ensure the fertility of the flock. Mixing animal breeds or seeds was thought to 'marry them' so they would magically produce offspring. Such thoughts were unhelpful for the worshippers of God, and so anything which could have been a stumbling block in their understanding and lead them away from God towards the pagan Canaanite religion was prohibited. Hence, although these laws may appear to be arbitrary to us, they served an important purpose at the time - encouraging the purity of God's people.

## **Laws of social concern**

*Deuteronomy 14: 28 - 29: At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.*

In a harsh world of fierce tribal loyalty and seemingly little human compassion, the Old Covenant laws of law social concern are radically ahead of their time. Most cultures had scant regard for the needs of foreigners, the fatherless and widows. God's law makes it incumbent upon the whole nation to demonstrate compassion and care to those in need.

In the law of the Old Testament, we see the seeds of social compassion which all civilised societies have subsequently adopted. Further, God's blessing is conditional

upon human willingness to offer practical care and concern for those in need.

### **And finally....**

*Leviticus 19:1-2 The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'"*

The call to keep the law of God is a call to be holy. Holiness is about more than just obedience. The people of Israel, as well as believers today, are called to live God-like lives. If our faith is to have any integrity, it must be demonstrated not just in words, but in a radical lifestyle which puts God at the centre of all that we are and do.