

# Which Old Testament LAWS Should We Keep Today?

Here are the basic principles explaining which Old Testament laws are still in force. Here is how you can know which laws in the Old Testament were changed or are no longer necessary, and which we are commanded to observe today!

by Herman L. Hoeh

PEOPLE often ask us, "How can I know the difference between the added ceremonial laws and the spiritual laws which we are to observe today?"

This question is absolutely BASIC.

Everyone needs to understand in detail the answer to this question. Christian growth — one's very character — depends on understanding the answer to this question.

The entire Bible was written to illustrate the lives of individuals who have kept the spiritual laws God set in motion. We need to study their example.

## Ten Commandments Binding at Creation

Few religionists recognize the eternal binding authority of the Ten Commandments. Yet, David was inspired to say: "All his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness" (Psalm 111:7-8). Jesus didn't abolish the Ten Commandments. "Think not," He said, "that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

We must follow His example today and fulfill the law. We must believe the prophets, too — and obey God as they commanded us.

The Ten Commandments constitute the basic spiritual law which regulates human life. It is "holy, just and good," said Paul in Romans 7:12 and 14.

First, remember that God's basic spiritual laws existed from the beginning. This Law is summed up in the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses

on Mt. Sinai. These Commandments existed from the very beginning — since creation. (Write for our free reprint, "Were the Ten Commandments in Force Before Moses?")

The patriarch Abraham kept those Commandments. Of him, God said: "Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my STATUTES, and my LAWS" (Gen. 26:5).

Not only did Abraham keep God's Commandments, but he also kept God's STATUTES and LAWS. What were these statutes and laws? The Ten Commandments formed the basis of God's Law given to His people. But in addition to these Commandments, many other common STATUTES were also given for the general well-being of the people — together with JUDGMENTS for the protection of everyone's legal rights.

Statutes are expressions of a law-maker, usually commanding or forbidding that certain things be done. Judgments are binding decisions of judges based on God's previously revealed law. They are used in settling disputes and to render a sentence or verdict.

The Commandments apply to individual conduct, the statutes to national administration, and the judgments to decisions rendered under the Commandments and the statutes.

The world strayed so far from the truth that, by the days of Moses, God had to reveal His laws and statutes anew to the Israelites. Ancient Israel had lost a knowledge of God's ways while in Egyptian bondage. Let us

notice, however, that God was merely revealing the laws which were already in force. The old covenant did not establish the spiritual laws.

In Exodus 16:28 we read that the Eternal, when speaking about Israel to Moses, said: "How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?"

Israel could not refuse what did not exist!

Now turn to Exodus 18:16. Moses told his father-in-law that when the people have a dispute, "I do make them know the statutes of God, and his laws."

## Other Laws Based on Ten Commandments

Notice! Here again are the statutes and laws of God existing BEFORE the old covenant. As they existed before the old covenant, they could not be abolished when it ceased to exist. The old covenant could not destroy what it did not bring into force. The old covenant was merely an AGREEMENT to keep these laws which were already in force!

Notice just how the statutes and laws of God magnify the Ten Commandments: God forbids us to eat unclean meats. To lust after what He forbids is to covet. One of the Ten Commandments says: "Thou shalt NOT covet." (Request our free reprint, "Is All Animal Flesh Good Food?")

Notice also that God's law made provision for judgments to be established over the centuries. (See Numbers 27:11 for example.) The judgments are binding decisions based on God's previously revealed law.

But when did the carnal ceremonies

and sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood begin? And how can we distinguish them from the statutes and laws that existed *prior* to the old covenant?

### When Did Sacrificial Laws Begin?

When God brought Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai, He gave the Ten Commandments to them. He allowed Moses to declare all the statutes and judgments to Israel (Exodus, chapters 20-24). These statutes and judgments **MAGNIFY** the Ten Commandments.

Now notice carefully. There is only one sacrifice mentioned in the book of the law — the *passover* sacrifice (Exodus 23:18). God called it "MY sacrifice." Next, turn to Jeremiah 7:22-23. Listen to what the Eternal inspired Jeremiah to write: "For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I DID NOT SPEAK . . . OR COMMAND *them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices*. But this COMMAND I GAVE THEM: 'Obey my voice . . . and walk in ALL THE WAY THAT I COMMAND YOU, that it may be well with you'" (Revised Standard Version).

God did not command these sacrifices to be offered originally. This explains why none of those temporary sacrifices were perpetuated by different symbols in the New Testament Church. **ONLY THE PASSOVER IS PRESERVED BY DIFFERENT SYMBOLS TODAY** — because it began *before* the old covenant was made. (See its institution in Exodus 12 before the Israelites left Egypt.)

The very fact that Jesus substituted unleavened bread and wine for the Passover lamb only, and not for the temporary offerings, is absolute proof that the ceremonial old testament offerings are not binding today! — but that the Passover *is* binding! (Write for our free booklet, *How Often Should We Partake of the Lord's Supper?*)

Paul says (Gal. 3:19) these temporary rituals and sacrifices were "added because of transgressions" — because God's spiritual law was being broken — *until* Christ should come. They foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ and were a "reminder of sin" to teach the people the need of the Messiah who would pay the penalty of human transgression (Hebrews 10:3).

Notice that these temporary laws did *not* define sin. They were reminders of sin. *God's spiritual laws define* sin. The laws which define sin — which explain what sin is — these laws we are to keep today.

### Sacrifices FOREVER?

Consider for a moment the New Testament instructions about sacrifices.

Today we have *spiritual* offerings and sacrifices: We are being "built into . . . a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ," wrote Peter. (See I Peter 2:5 and 9, RSV.) We are to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, our spiritual service (Romans 12:1).

It is a *spiritual principle* to offer oneself in living obedience — to sacrifice the self — to God. God Almighty is worthy to receive such service from us.

The principle of offering sacrifices existed before Moses. Christ volunteered to offer Himself *from the beginning* to pay for the sins of mankind. In the period from Moses to Christ the practice of giving offerings was reduced to a physical plane. The children of Israel were a physical, carnal people without the promise of the Holy Spirit. They could not offer themselves in spiritual obedience to God (Deut. 29:4), so they performed ritualistic washings and offered animals and other physical types instead.

They also *needed to be reminded* of Jesus' sacrifice, so God gave them physical types in the "law of Moses," "until the seed should come." But remember, the *spiritual sacrifices* — of which those in the law of Moses were merely temporary types — are still to be offered up by us today!

"But," many ask, "weren't the Levitical sacrifices ordained *forever*?"

Yes, the Bible does say that the Levitical priesthood and its sacrifices were to be perpetual or forever. But let us understand the real significance of the Hebrew word translated "forever." It means *continuous, so long as the factors involved exist*.

Notice three scriptures where this meaning is made plain. Men could be the slaves of a master *forever* — meaning till the death of one of the parties.

(See Exodus 21:6; Lev. 25:46; Deut. 15:17.)

What are the factors which may limit the offering of sacrifices? One, the *need* of a physical, human priesthood. Two, the *need* for sacrifices.

Now consider the following:

What is the purpose of a priesthood? To offer sacrifices and to act on behalf of men in relation to God (Hebrews 5:1 and 8:3). But how long do offerings as reminders of sin need to be made? Paul tells us: "Now where remission of [sins] is, *there is no more offering for sin*" (Hebrews 10:18).

To offer sacrifices as reminders of sins already paid for by Jesus, who gave His life in full payment for all sins, is needless.

Moreover, since the Holy Spirit has also been made available, physical offerings and various washings which are types of the Holy Spirit are no longer needed. Hence the physical Levitical priesthood is no longer necessary — the Old Testament washings and offerings are no longer binding. The factors involved in the law of Moses ceased to exist.

For further understanding about sacrifices, request our *free* reprint, "The Sacrificial System in Ancient Israel."

### God ALONE Changes Laws

Perhaps we have failed to realize that God **ALONE** has the right to add and change or alter the ritual laws.

*The ritual laws were subject to change because they were only types* of the promised seed, Christ, who should take upon Himself the sins of the world. When the circumstances were altered, the obligation to practice the ritualistic laws ceased.

But what about the spiritual laws?

**GOD WILL NOT ALTER HIS SPIRITUAL LAWS.** The spiritual laws describe the very character of God. They enable us to know what God is like. Since the character of God remains *unchanging* — "I change not," says the Eternal (Mal. 3:6) and "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8) — the spiritual laws could not change.

Now let us notice where we can find

exactly what constituted the temporary laws. Turn with me to Hebrews 9:9-10.

### Ritual Laws Distinguished from Others

In these two verses we read of the material gifts and sacrifices which included "ONLY meats and drinks and diverse washings and carnal ordinances, imposed until the time of reformation."

Notice that the temporary laws did not pertain to murder or theft or sabbath-breaking, but were ONLY those ordinances regulating meat and drink offerings and different washings or ablutions of the unclean. *These external washings were a type of the Holy Spirit cleaning us up from within.*

Any other laws not included in Hebrews 9:10 were *not* part of the rituals added because of sin!

Remember this point!

It will help you to know which rites in the Old Testament were added to the statutes and judgments already in existence.

### What Is the Law of Moses?

Some people are easily confused by the trick statement that the Ten Commandments are the law of Moses. They turn to Luke 2:22-24 in which the ceremonies of the "law of Moses" are also called part of the "law of the Lord."

Why is the "law of Moses" also called the "law of the Lord"?

Because all law comes from God! Moses was not the lawmaker! He merely told the people the laws that God set in motion (John 1:17).

The law of Moses is NEVER called the Ten Commandments. It comprises only statutes and judgments which God gave him to communicate to the people. The difference between the law of Moses and the Ten Commandments is that God spoke the Ten Commandments, but *Moses* delivered the statutes and judgments.

Now, let us recall that when Moses first delivered the statutes and judgments, *the law of Moses had no sacrifices connected with it.* Jeremiah said so! (Jer. 7:22.)

The law of Moses was originally the civil law, based on the principles of the Ten Commandments. These civil stat-

utes and judgments are right and good (Psalm 119:7, 8).

But *after* the close of the old covenant (Ex. 24), the Levitical priesthood was established and the laws regulating offerings were added (Exodus 28:1). (Prior to this time offerings were voluntary and young men were priests — Exodus 24:5.)

Therefore the law of Moses *has more than one part!*

Notice God's definition of the original part of that law in Malachi 4:4 (RSV): "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel."

*This* law we are not to forget. We are to keep it!

But added to this law later were other statutes regulating material rituals, such as sacrifices, lighting of candles, burning incense, and various washings for the unclean.

This almost unnoticed fact is what causes so much difficulty in understanding that the law of Moses was composed of *two* distinct parts: the civil and the ritualistic!

### Part of Law of Moses Still in Force!

Jesus said the two great commandments were love to God and love to neighbor. Do you know from where He quoted these laws?

Out of the book of the law! — the laws that Moses spoke to the people. Read it in Leviticus 19:18 (RSV): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

In II John 5 and 6, God commands Christians to obey these two basic laws which He communicated to the people by Moses! In II Kings 23:25, Josiah is praised because he "turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, ACCORDING TO ALL THE LAW OF MOSES"!

Notice how plain it is. The civil law of Moses expounds the Ten Commandments by revealing how the ten basic principles are to be applied. We are to

*keep* this part of the law, not in the strictness of the letter, but according to its spirit and intent.

### Added Part NO LONGER in Force

Then why do we read in Acts that Gentile converts do not have to observe the "law of Moses," except for four points? (Acts 15.) The answer is made plain in Acts 21:21.

The laws of Moses called in question involved "customs." Read it for yourself. The Jews were falsely accusing Paul, saying that he taught Jews living abroad "not to circumcise their children or observe the CUSTOMS"! (Acts 21:21.)

The controversy in the early Church did not involve the *civil* law of Moses. It involved only the *ceremonial additions* to the original *civil* law of Moses — only *customs* — ADDED ceremonies or rituals.

This is further proven by noticing the four points, included in the law added by Moses, which are binding on all Christians everywhere. We are not to eat blood, animals which are strangled, meats offered to idols or to practice fornication (Acts 15:20). These four points were originally part of the civil law of Moses.

They were also included *later* with the added ceremonies to regulate the typical sacrifices. The Gentiles ate their sacrifices with the blood, often strangled their animals, and presented them to idols. They also committed fornication in their religious ceremonies. *To prevent these pagan customs being practiced by Israel,* God included the four civil laws along with the rituals. (See Lev. 17:7 and 10; Numbers 25:1-3.)

When the ceremonies were declared no longer binding (in Acts 15); these four points had to be declared binding because some would have thought they were abolished along with the temporary rituals. But since these four points were part of the civil law before the addition of the rituals, they remained binding *after* the abolition of the physical sacrifices and washings!

How plain! *Only the ceremonial customs* of the law of Moses have passed away.

The *civil* law of Moses *which*

*defined sin* was not called in question, was not involved.

The many civil laws regulating tithing, clean and unclean meats, the annual sabbaths, and many others are still for the New Testament Church because they explain what sin is. They were *not* part of the *ceremonial* law of Moses mentioned in Hebrews 9:10 and abolished in Acts 15. The civil principles of the law of Moses were a *separate* law and not part of the *added* "law of Moses" which is no longer in force.

### The Administration of Death

Now let us consider the use of the death penalty in Old Testament times.

A common question often asked is this: Why do we not enforce the death penalty for sabbath-breakers or for any other violation of the Ten Commandments?

The answer to this question is found in Matthew 5. Let us turn to this important chapter again. Jesus was anticipating doubts in the minds of the disciples. He commences by saying He came to keep the law, not to destroy it. Then He proceeds to CHANGE the APPLICATION of the civil laws as they were given to ancient Israel. He magnifies them and makes them honorable (Isaiah 42:21). He raises them from narrow, national laws — given to a carnal nation to be administered according to the strict letter — to a spiritual plane regulating the whole of human society. Six times Jesus says: "You have heard it said in olden times. . . . But I say to you. . . ." and He then proceeds to expound the spiritual principles *underlying the civil laws of Moses*.

For more information about the Administration of Death, write for our FREE article, "Is Obedience to God Required for Salvation?"

### An Eye for an Eye?

Many have read the command in Exodus 21:24-25 with shocked amazement at the assumed cruelty of the God of the Old Testament. They suppose

anyone causing a person accidentally to lose sight of an eye would immediately be seized, held down, and have *his* eye gouged out!

But is this true? Let's understand the *real* meaning of these instructions.

The context in which we find this command of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" is explaining the principle of *just recompense* for any wrong done. The very next verse shows that if a person causes his slave to lose his eye or tooth, the slave must be freed as a PAYMENT for the injury — workmen's compensation. Verses 18 and 19 of the same chapter discuss the matter of one person injuring another. What is the punishment? "...he shall *pay* for the loss of his time, and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed." It was a matter of *payment* or recompense — not revenge by inflicting the same injury.

Then verse 22 shows that a person should be punished if he causes a pregnant woman to have a miscarriage. What is the punishment in this case? Again it is "...and he shall *pay* as the judges determine." The whole context of the "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" command is concerned with the matter of just recompense or payment for the injury caused.

The purpose of Christ's teachings in the "Sermon on the Mount" was to *magnify* the Old Testament law, not annul it (Isaiah 42:21; Matthew 5:17-19). Since the intent of the law was love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40), Christ was better showing us how to love our fellowman.

In Matthew 5:38-42 Christ shows that a true Christian should be willing to suffer wrong done to him if necessary (I Peter 2:19-20). For instance, Christ paid a tax which really did not apply to Him (Matthew 17:24-27). Paul gave us the instructions that followers of God should be in complete submission to government authority even though it was unjust at times (Romans 13:1-7).

The instructions given to Moses about "an eye for an eye" were not some cruel yoke of bondage. They were

laws set up to regulate a society in a fair and just manner. Christ was not doing away with the law as some have supposed. He was showing what a *Christian's* attitude should be when unjustly wronged.

### Civil Law Restored to Perfection

JESUS RESTORED THESE SPIRITUAL LAWS as they were from the beginning. But why was Moses commanded to give them only in the letter to ancient Israel?

Ancient Israel was a national church — a physical nation organized into the congregation of Israel. The people did not have the promise of the Holy Spirit; they were a nation of *this* world. Moses said that they did not even have the power or strength of will to keep what little he commanded them (Deut. 5:29).

And neither do human beings today! People don't want to obey the commandments. "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God. . . ." (Rom. 8:7). Israel needed punishments for lawbreakers to keep peace and security in the land. Therefore God allowed human judges to take His divine prerogatives and to execute punishments on their fellowmen.

*Jesus gave the civil law to Moses in the strict letter at Mount Sinai for a physical church.* Fifteen centuries later Jesus restored the spirit of the law for the *spiritual* Church of God.

Jesus came to make it possible for us to be forgiven and to have the very nature of God acting in us. Therefore *He restored the civil law to its original spiritual perfection.* □

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