

A Gift From Heaven

The Bible and “Outdated” Israelite Law

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Lesson 23

REFORMED
EVANGELISM
TASKFORCE

The Bible and "Outdated" Israelite Law

The significance of the gospels and the epistles for the church of Jesus today is obvious. The New Testament is Indispensable for the church. The Old Testament, too, contains passages that right away demonstrate their great importance for us today. Take for instance the Psalms. Take those passages and prophecies which shed light on the coming of Jesus Christ. Take those parts which speak about right conduct and proper living. There is much in the Old Testament that speaks to us.

Superfluous Part in the Bible

Yet, there are other parts of the Old Testament which makes us wonder. What are we to do with them? For example, Exodus gives a very graphic and detailed description of the building and decoration of the tabernacle. Naturally these passages were of great importance to the Jews, but what are we going to do with them?

In the book of Leviticus you run into many laws and rules that are related to the worship service of the people of Israel. After reading Leviticus you find yourself with the same problem as in Exodus. What are we going to do with these texts?

Of course, it is not advisable to begin your Bible study with these passages, but as your knowledge of the Bible grows they cannot be left out. If you want to understand what the Bible teaches us about Jesus Christ, you also have to know something about the laws and rituals of the Old Testament. The Bible does not contain unnecessary parts, even if it seems to at first sight.

Dry Laws Are Alive!

However, even parts which we would be inclined to skip have their significance. The easiest way to explain this is by using an example. As we said, the book of Exodus contains a detailed description of the building and decoration of the tabernacle (*Ex. 25-30*). The smallest details receives attention, right down to the loops and hooks that attach the curtains of the tabernacle to each other. You could easily make a very accurate model with this type of description.

Later in the book of Exodus it is even repeated, this time with a view to the actual construction of the temple (*Ex. 35-39*). You are inclined to ask, "Is all this really necessary in a book like the Bible?" According to us it would be quite sufficient to know that everything was done as it had been ordered. Still, there must be a reason for this repetition. The very least we can gather from it is that it was very important to God that His blueprint was followed to the letter. The religious centre of Israel should not come about as a result of human imagination and ingenuity. The Israelites were not allowed to draw up the blueprints themselves. The people had to show that they trusted God's order's exactly. In worship it is God's will that must be done. Indeed, it is noteworthy and revealing that the chapters in between the two descriptions give us a vivid example of what happens when God's orders are ignored (*Ex. 32-34*). However, the people did obey and as a sign of God's approval He filled the tabernacle with His glory. Isn't that a wonderful climax to the elaborate description of these building plans?

What Does It Mean for Us Today?

From dry laws and extensive descriptions of building plans we can learn that man's salvation from sin and reconciliation with God is not just something we devise or accomplish. By issuing ceremonial and religious laws for almost every detail in the worship and daily life, God teaches the Israelites that He alone redeems them from sin.

The Day of Atonement

The book of Leviticus also has something to teach us. The worship services conducted by the priest in the tabernacle are closely related to the coming of Jesus Christ. The Israelites are being prepared for that coming. This can be seen in *Lev. 16* which describes the highlight of the religious year in Israel. On the Day of Atonement, as it was called, the task of the high priest was extensive and complicated. We will give a very brief summary of what happened, but to get an accurate picture of this involved ceremony you have to read *Lev. 16*. The high priest had to wash himself completely and put on clean clothes. After that he had to offer a sin offering to atone for his own sins. Then he had to kill a ram and enter the sanctuary with its blood and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat of the Ark. Another ram was sent off into the desert weighed down with the sins of the people.

This complicated ritual did not really accomplish any reconciliation between God and His people. Rather, these offerings were a symbol of the true atonement that Christ would bring (*Ps. 40:6-8*). Furthermore, the offerings on the Day of Atonement clearly illustrated man's weakness for neither man nor beast could carry the burden of the punishment of sin and bring about true reconciliation with God. At the same time God taught and emphasized one thing: there will come a time when a perfect offering has to be brought by a perfect High Priest (*Heb. 7:27*). That High Priest will offer up Himself. Everything that happened on the Day of Atonement points forward to His sacrifice. Already in the Old Testament God forgave the sins of Israel because He knew the Messiah would bring salvation. You can read about this in the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament (*Heb. 7:23-27, 8-10*).

The glad tidings ring out through the entire Bible, also through the so-called "dry" passages of the Old Testament. The Messiah, Jesus, shall come to do what we people could not possibly do ourselves. He came to save us from our sins.

The Lamb Jesus

The Passover is another Israelite ritual that has the joyous message of the New Testament in it. During the Passover a lamb was offered and its blood was painted on the door posts. It was a feast in which the Israelites celebrated their deliverance out of Egypt. Then they recalled their deliverance from slavery and how their eldest sons were saved from death. It was a feast with a meaning that far exceeded its historical background (*cf. Rev. 5*). Egypt became the symbol of the slavery of sin and death. No sacrificial lamb could save man from that power. Only the Paschal Lamb, Jesus, could do this. That was the reason why Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the celebration of the Passover. When you pay attention to that, you will see the real meaning of the Passover in the Old Testament. Then you will also discover the real message of what would otherwise be just another ritual. This Passover foreshadows Jesus' painful death on Golgotha. His sacrifice delivers all those who belong to Him from the slavery of sin.

Jesus Will Come

Whoever does no more than acknowledge the rules, precepts and laws in the Old Testament as a description of ancient Israelite folklore has missed the whole point. God's purpose is to tell us much more through them. Using laws and ceremonies God has prepared His people for the coming of the Christ. Through faith in Christ, the people of Israel were delivered from their guilt. God has also given the Old Testament laws and rules to us in our time. They help us understand what the New Testament says about Christ. That means that through faith in Christ you, too, can be delivered from your guilt.

Forgiveness from Sin

Article 10

All parents get angry at their children sometime. Good parents, however, will at the same time be very hurt. They know how much they love their children. Their anger is not a display of hot temper, for that is something quite different. When a person loses his temper he loses control of himself. Such is not the case with a loving parent.

This is just an example, a weak example, of how God the Father treats us. God is very angry at our sins. His "wrath is kindled against us" as the Bible puts it (*Deut. 11:17*). The person who wants nothing to do with God any longer, and who has become His enemy, will have to pay for that forever. That is how angry God is, that also shows how just He is. Just like the loving parent though, the anger of the Lord does not take anything away from His love. God loves people, and therefore wants them to be forgiven and redeemed without abandoning His righteousness. In all His anger He still thinks of His children and takes pity on them (*Hab. 3:2*).

The Love of God

Sinful man cannot redeem himself. If man would have to satisfy God's justice by himself, he would have to carry the punishment for his sin and at the same time love Him with all his strength. There is not a person on earth who is able to do that, or would even be willing to do that. Since God loves us, He took the initiative to save us from sin. The love of God is very visible in His act of salvation. He loves the world and the people He created so much that "he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*John 3:16*).

The Father has given His Son, and sent Him into the world of sinful people (*Gal. 4:4*). That does not mean that the Son is a docile puppet in the hands of His Father. Christ also wanted to save us. God brought salvation for sinful people. God sent His Son, and the Son let Himself be sent. "I and the Father are one" (*John 10:30*). Jesus said that when He spoke of how He would save sinners at the cost of His own life. "...I lay down my life for the sheep" (*John 10:15*).

The Father gave His only Son. That sentence expresses the magnitude of the sacrifice God made as a result of His perfect love. Jesus let Himself be sent by God. He also gave Himself voluntarily (*James 1:18*). And from the beginning to the end the Holy Spirit co-operated, in love, to make salvation possible for sinners (*Matt. 4:1; Heb. 9:14*).

The Son, God and Man

The Son came to this earth on Christmas night in the same way all other children come into the world. He was delivered into the world by a woman. He was God, but He assumed our human nature. He remained God, but He also became a man like us (*Heb. 2:14,17; John 1:14*). The creating Spirit of God caused Mary, without having had intercourse with a man, to conceive. Becoming and being a weak man without glory was a great humiliation for Jesus the Son of God. He was without sin, and yet He allowed Himself to be treated like a terrible criminal (*Phil. 2:8; Heb. 4:15*). He allowed

Himself to be charged with a debt which man, not He, had incurred. He let Himself be crucified, a punishment which God had instituted to signify His curse on a person. When Jesus hung on the cross He suffered the curse of God. He was totally forsaken by God for us (*Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:22-23; Matt. 27:46*).

The Son of God took the place of the true culprits. "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed" (*Is. 53:4-6*). Jesus took the guilt upon Himself because we could not possibly pay our own debts. He was without sin but was made to be sin for us (*2 Cor. 5:21; Matt. 20:28*).

The love of God is the source of our salvation. We did not ask Him for that. It came initially and exclusively from God. Through Christ, God has reconciled the world to Himself (*2 Cor. 5:19*). Through faith in Christ we are saved from sin. Christ's righteousness is given to us, as if we ourselves had paid for our sins. Through faith we are saved; through faith no punishment awaits us (*Eph. 2:8; John 3:18*).

God Calls for a Celebration

Once Jesus told His disciples the story of a young man who ran away from home. It is known as "the parable of the prodigal son" (*Luke 15:11-32*). Later on in the story that young man started to feel very sorry that he was not home any longer. His experiences were not as exciting as he expected. He returned home defeated, miserable and starved. He wanted to restore the relationship between himself and his father. But would his father want to see him back again? Most certainly! His father was keeping an eye out for him everyday. Finally one day he saw his son approaching in the distance. Even before they met the father had forgiven the prodigal son in his heart. Before the son finished his confession of guilt, the father called his servants to prepare a feast. It was time to celebrate! The father exclaimed, "For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Our heavenly Father acts just like that earthly father. Now that He has been reconciled to His children through Christ, the road is open for the Father to express His love by forgiving and saving His elect (*Rom. 8:29,30*). Whoever believes is saved. It is Christ's will that God forgive the sinner's sins. Whoever believes may be certain of that. Perhaps that is not always so visible in the lives of the believers. Their lives are often full of suffering and sadness (*Rom. 8:18*). But already now there is reason to celebrate. God celebrates every time a sinner repents, and so should we (*Luke 15:10*).

Live with Joy

Christians say, "We are saved." Meanwhile, they become ill; they know grief; they get tired; they die just like everyone else. So what does it mean then to be saved? First of all, we must remember that this is the age of faith (*2 Cor. 5:6-10*). God is still calling people to believe. Missionaries go throughout the world telling everyone about Jesus and asking them to repent in His Name. As long as God is still busy doing that the full glory of His victorious work is not yet apparent (*2 Cor. 5:1,2*).

Still, those Christians who say, "We are saved", are right. To be reconciled with God also means to be saved from sin. He who is reconciled to God knows for sure that he will also be redeemed (*Eph. 1:5*). Therefore, whoever believes may say: I am saved. He already may enjoy that salvation because he is a child of God. Whoever believes, may relate to God as His child (*John 1:12*). And like a father, He looks after those who believe, those who have put their trust in Him. They know that everything that happens, also the unfortunate things, are used by God for their own good (*Rom. 8:28*). They will also begin to notice that they are freed from the power of sin (*Rom. 8:15-17*). The Holy Spirit works in their hearts and shapes them into new people. That is, people who know God again, ask for Him, and obey Him.

The children of God are His heirs (*Rom. 8:17*). Their inheritance is much more than any earthly inheritance could ever be. It is a new body, a perfect body, and life in a new and perfect world. That makes their lives a joy. It makes them thankful; it makes them pray; it makes their lives secure; it makes them look forward to Christ's return. A feast without end is coming!

Pentecost

Acts 2

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He left behind His disciples - alone but not forsaken. From the Mount of Olives they returned to Jerusalem, "with great joy" (*Luke 24:52*) because they believed the promise that Jesus had given them before His death. Jesus would not forsake them. He would send the Holy Spirit (*John 14:18*). Just before His ascension into heaven Jesus had repeated that promise again. They would be baptized with the Holy Spirit who would strengthen and guide them in fulfilling their difficult task of proclaiming the good news of salvation to the world (*Acts 1:4,5,8; Matt. 3:11*). They had to wait for the Holy Spirit before they went out into the world with their message, for without the Holy Spirit they would not have been able. While they were waiting they prepared themselves for their task. The place of Judas which had become vacant also had to be filled. Before they went out into the world their number had to be complete, so under the guidance of God they chose a new twelfth apostle, Matthias. Now all they needed was the Holy Spirit.

Filled with the Holy Spirit

A few days after the ascension of Christ the celebration of the feast of Pentecost began. Pentecost was an Israelite harvest feast which was celebrated seven weeks after the Passover. (The word Pentecost comes from the Greek word which means "fiftieth day".) During Pentecost the first loaves of bread, baked with the newly harvested grain, were offered to God. The feast was, therefore, sometimes called the feast of the first fruits (*Deut. 26:1-11*).

On that festive day the disciples and the other followers of Jesus were all in one place together. Approximately 120 people, men and women, were gathered together (*Acts 1:12-15, 2:1*). Suddenly something very strange happened. They heard something that sounded like a storm. Then they saw tongues that looked like fire. The Holy Spirit, which cannot be heard or seen by people, was represented by wind and fire (*Acts 2:1-3*). The tongues descended upon all those present; without distinction they all were filled with the Spirit. The promise of Jesus had become reality.

Immediately, the effects of the Spirit became obvious. They all spoke in many different languages, languages that they had never learned. Peter delivered a speech to the amazed crowd that gathered. Peter, the simple fisherman, eloquently explained to the crowd that the promise which God gave Abraham was being fulfilled before their very eyes. "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your descendants after you" (*Gen. 17:7*). Peter explained that this promise was for them and their descendants. All they had to do was to repent and believe and they, too, would receive the Spirit of God. They would not receive the Spirit firstly to speak many languages but to help direct their lives toward God.

For Every Believer

The small congregation of Jesus now became His witness, as Jesus had commanded (*Acts 1:8*). They were equipped to do that in a wonderful way. They spoke languages they did not even know, "as the Spirit gave them utterance" (*Acts 2:4*).

During the day on which the Holy Spirit descended, three thousand people joined this small congregation; or rather, three thousand were "added" to that congregation (*Acts 2:41*). They were added by the Spirit who opened their hearts. On the feast of the first fruits, they were like the first fruits of the church in the New Testament. From that day on the church was gathered out of all the nations of the world through the Word of Christ and His Spirit. Since that day the Spirit "dwells" in the congregation and in every believer.

"For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will dwell in them and I will be their God and they shall be my people.'" (*2 Cor. 6:16*)

After Pentecost the congregation becomes the dwelling place and the temple of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 3:16*). Also, every individual believer is a temple of the Spirit. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" (*1 Cor. 6:19*) Every believer is, as it were, used as a living stone to build the congregation, the temple of the Spirit of God (*1 Pet. 2:4-10*).

King, Priest and Prophet

In the Old Testament when people received an important position they were anointed with sacred oil (*Psa. 133:2*). That anointing was a sign to the priests, prophets and kings that they had received the Holy Spirit to help them fulfill their task (*Ex. 30:30; 1 Kings 19:16; 1 Sam. 16:12,13*). After Pentecost, not just a few received the Holy Spirit, but many were "anointed".

Jesus was a priest, a prophet, as well as a king. The Holy Spirit had descended upon Him too (*Matt. 3:16*). After the day of Pentecost every believer is anointed with the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2:17,18*). Along with Christ every believer is now a prophet, priest and king. He is a prophet to proclaim God to other people, a priest to offer himself as a living sacrifice of thankfulness to God, and a king to fight against sin and the devil (*Joel 2:28,29*).

No believer can escape this appointment. Nobody may or can call himself a "layman". "But you have been anointed by the Holy One" (*1 John 2:20*). "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light" (*1 Pet. 2:9*).

Let Yourself Be Guided

When the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost the Spirit passed by the stone temple in Jerusalem where God used to dwell. The temple had done its duty. It would be destroyed, as Jesus foretold, because God now dwelt wherever believers came together (*Matt. 24:1,2*). The Spirit also passed by the Jewish church leaders. They believed they could save themselves by their good works, but the Holy Spirit only descended on people who believed in Jesus.

The priests and scribes, the spiritual leaders of Israel, also had to be converted. They also had to join the Christian congregation, the new spiritual temple of the covenant. And a "great" number of priests did so too (*Acts 6:7*). If the Spirit works in someone, no one can stop Him.

The rapidly expanding congregation was now the place where the Spirit dwelt and worked. The Spirit had come to live in everyone who believed and in the Christian church as a whole. Now all believers individually and the church as a whole must let themselves be guided by that Spirit as well (*Rev. 2:7*).

Abide in Him!

"But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him" (*1 John 2:27*).

In other words, let yourself be guided by the Spirit and listen to the Word of Christ. The Spirit shall guide the congregation into the truth. Only through truth, the Word of Christ, will the Spirit come to dwell in the hearts of people. Then the Holy Spirit will take care that you hold to the faith. He will never let you go.

Questions 23

The Bible and "Outdated" Israelite Law

1. What is the essence of the sin of Nadab and Abihu? (*Lev. 10:1-7*) Why were they punished so severely?
2. God wants His precepts regarding the worship service to be followed exactly. That's illustrated by many examples. What sin was committed by the men of Beth-Shemes, (*1 Sam. 6:19*) and why did Uzza die? (*2 Sam. 6:7; Num. 4:15, 5:5, 17-20; Ex. 37:5, 40:3*) Was David to blame also? (*2 Sam. 6:3,13*)
3. What are the differences between the high priest in the Old Testament and the High Priest Christ? And what are the distinct similarities? (*Heb. 4:14-5:10, 7:11-28*)

Forgiveness from Sin

1. How has God shown to us that His love is great?
2. A surety guarantees that someone will honour his obligations to someone else. In *Heb. 7:22* Jesus is called a surety. Why?
3. *Luke 15* contains two more parables besides the parable of the prodigal son. What are the similarities of the three parables? What does the word "prodigal" mean in the prodigal son?

Pentecost

1. What other effect did the Spirit have on the disciples beside the ability to speak in different languages? (*Acts 3:1-10*)
2. The Holy Spirit directs the preaching of the gospel. How can you see that in *Acts 13:1-5* and in *Acts 16:6-10* ?
3. During their missionary work Peter and John encountered a man named Simon who was a sorcerer. How did he think he could receive the Holy Spirit? What did Peter tell him he had to do instead? (*Acts 8:9-24*)