

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 5 - The Old Covenant 2 - God's Rule

Key Questions:

- How can we know what is right and wrong? How can we recognise what sin is?

Abraham's descendants in slavery (Exodus chapter 1)

The book of Genesis ends with the nation of Israel living in the land of Egypt. At first they were protected by Abraham's great-grandson Joseph, but after Joseph died the Egyptians began to feel threatened by the growing Israelite population within their country. They were afraid that if the numbers of Israelites grew too large they might take over control of Egypt. The Pharaoh (Egyptian emperor) made the Israelites slaves working in construction (this fulfilled God's words to Abraham in Genesis 15:13). It seemed that God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan could not come true. The Israelites lost hope in God's promises and no longer worshipped Him through sacrifice. Instead of being free to worship God in the land he promised them, they were slaves in a foreign land. They needed to be delivered from slavery and taken to the land of Canaan and to be reminded how to worship God through sacrifice. However, God had not forgotten His promises, and this slavery actually fulfilled His word to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-16).

Moses - leader of Israel

Moses was one of the greatest leaders the people of Israel ever had. He was born around 1526 BC and lived for 120 years. His life can be divided into three 40 year periods:

Growing up as an Egyptian – birth to age 40 (Exodus 2:1-10)

- Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the Pharaoh wanted to kill every male Israelite baby.
- His mother hid him for three months until he was adopted by a princess and raised in the Egyptian palace.
- During this time Moses would have learned the Egyptian language and culture, and useful leadership skills.

Living in the Desert – aged 40-80 years (Exodus 2:11-25)

- Moses never forgot that he was an Israelite. Aged 40 he murdered an Egyptian who had mistreated an Israelite.
- Moses had to run away into the desert to avoid punishment. He lived there for 40 years working as a shepherd.
- During this time Moses married and had a family. He also learnt how to survive in a desert situation.

Leading the People of Israel – aged 80-120 years (Exodus 3 – Deuteronomy 34)

- Aged 80, Moses met God, who called him to lead His people (God spoke to him from a burning bush).
- Moses felt inadequate to speak to Pharaoh, but God confirmed His power to Moses by performing miracles.
- During this time Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and received the Law of God.

God delivers His people from Slavery

Moses returned to Egypt after meeting God. God delivered his people and restored his covenant with them in stages:

- 1. Faith in God restored (Exodus 4:27-31)** – The Israelites had trouble believing that God was speaking to His people again after 400 years, so God used Moses to perform some miracles (extraordinary things that are outside the normal rules of nature). Miracles are often called "signs" (see Exodus 1:8&9), because they are intended to show people that God is really at work by making people notice that something special is happening. The Israelites believed Moses when he told them that God had called them because they saw the miraculous signs.
- 2. God's promises restored (Exodus 6:2-8)** – God reminded the Israelites of His promise that He would have a special relationship with them as His people and would live in the land He gave to them. Canaan is described by God as a land of plenty and peace (see Exodus 3:8). It was the promised land of God's presence for His people.
- 3. God shows His power through miracles (Exodus 7-10)** – Pharaoh refused to allow Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. God gave nine powerful signs to show that He was at work, but the Pharaoh still refused to listen. He "hardened his heart" against God.
- 4. Judgement and sacrifice restored (Exodus 11&12)** – Because Pharaoh refused to listen, God gave one last sign, which was also a judgement on Pharaoh and Egypt. He would kill the firstborn son in every family in Egypt. However, as well as restoring His judgement, God also restored the principle of sacrifice as the way for His people to be saved from judgement. The sacrifice He told the people to observe is called the "Passover" and it became the most important festival for Jewish people and the basis of a new calendar for them (Exodus 12:2). This was a new beginning for the Israelites, and the Jews still celebrate this feast today. The sacrifice had to be a lamb with no physical defects (as perfect as possible), and the blood of the lamb had to be sprinkled on the door frame of the house. The family could then eat the lamb's meat together in a special meal. When God judged the Egyptians, He spared the people in all those houses that had blood on the door frame (Exodus 12:12&13).
- 5. God delivers the people through the sea (Exodus 13:17-14:31)** – When Pharaoh saw the great loss of life in Egypt he allowed Moses to lead the Israelites out towards the land of Canaan, but after this he changed his mind, and sent his soldiers to chase after them. The Israelites were trapped between mountains on either side with a sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them. God performed a great miracle by lifting up the water of the sea to form a dry pathway for them to walk through, and He returned the waters on top of the Egyptian army when they tried to chase the Israelites. God saved His people in this powerful way, and they would remember it forever after this! There could be no doubt that God loved them and would care for them.

The Journey to Canaan (Numbers and Deuteronomy)

After they left Egypt with Moses, the people of Israel spent 40 years crossing the desert before they came to the land of Canaan. The journey should have been much shorter, but because the people who left Egypt refused to trust in God, He made them wander until all the adults who had left Egypt were dead except for two men (Joshua and Caleb) who had remained faithful to Him (see Numbers chapters 13&14). The story of these people teaches us something very important about faith: **true faith trusts and obeys God not only when life is going well, but also when our situation is difficult.** The people thanked God when He did great things for Him but they rejected Him when they were hungry. The New Testament shows us that they really had no real faith in God (Hebrews 3:7-19). A true Christian has surrendered their life to God – they are not just coming to Him to try and get something they want for themselves. Even Moses was forbidden from entering Canaan because he disobeyed God (Numbers 20). Despite their lack of faith, God kept the people alive in the desert by miraculously providing food for them. He sent them manna (a special kind of bread that they found lying on the ground in the mornings) and quails (a type of bird that fell from the sky). Moses led the people until he died in around 1406 BC. Before he died he challenged them to remember God's covenant and to obey His Law when they entered the land of Canaan. He said that God would bless them if they remained faithful and would curse them, even by removing them from the land, if they didn't (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15, 64).

God gives His Law through Moses

During the 40 years in the desert, God gave many laws to Moses for the people of Israel. These are recorded in the books Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Law can be divided broadly into three types of rules:

- 1. Rules about individual behaviour (moral law)** – These laws speak about the relationship of people with God and the relationships between people, showing what actions are right and wrong.
- 2. Rules about how to worship God (ceremonial law)** – These laws (mainly in Leviticus) speak about how various sacrifices should be made, special festival days, the Tabernacle (a special tent which represented God's presence with His people and where the sacrifices were made), and the clothing of the priests (see *Study Aids*).
- 3. Rules about how to govern the nation (civil law)** – God gave Moses rules about how people should be punished for certain crimes, and also how certain diseases should be treated. These laws included rules that were designed to provide good care for poor people and protection for slaves and widows, and laws forbidding the Israelites from wearing certain clothes and eating certain foods that would lead to disease or to identification with other nations and their religions. These laws were specific to the nation of Israel, and although they contain much wisdom that modern governments could learn from, the Bible does not expect that all nations should follow them.

After Moses passed God's Law to the Israelites they promised to keep every word of it. Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of a sacrifice to mark this amazing occasion (see Exodus 24:3-8). This marked the renewal of the covenant God had made with Abraham, bringing a new hope for God's Kingdom to come in the Promised Land. **The heart of the Law was this covenant relationship, and the heart of that covenant relationship was God's love for His people and the sacrifice that made it possible for Him to forgive their sins.** The God's people were now under His rule, but they were not yet in His place. The pattern for the Kingdom of God was not complete yet!

Three Purposes of God's Law

1. To show the people what God is like

The Law reveals God's character to us. Through it we realise that He is:

- a) Holy** – this word means that He is always perfect and always does right, and that He cannot tolerate sin.
- b) Loving** – He wants to live with His people and to be known and worshipped by them.

2. To show the people the best way to live (Exodus 20:1-17)

The Law was an expression of God's love for His people and their love for Him. Although the Law contains several hundred rules, Jesus taught that it could be summarised in two simple principles (Matthew 22:24-40):

- a) Love God with your whole being (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)** – the people were to *"love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"* [right worship]
- b) Love others as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18)** [right actions]

So, **the basis of the Law is love.** The rules contained in the Law were designed to teach the people what it would mean in practice to live out these two principles. For example, the famous **Ten Commandments**, which are a summary of the Law, contain four rules showing us how to love God and six rules showing us how to love others. God did not give His Law to make life difficult for His people but to show them the best way to live and to protect them from the harmful results of sin. If the nation kept God's Law their society would be just and fair for all people, and would shine to the other nations, showing them that God was the one true God.

3. To teach people that they needed God's forgiveness for their sin (Romans 2:1-3:20)

The Law would keep the people from sin and harm by teaching them what was right and wrong. Before the Law was given people only had their **conscience** (an inner sense of whether a choice or action is right or wrong) to guide them – although this is God-given, because of many generations of sin affecting our lives and human society it is damaged by sin and not fully reliable as a guide to what is right and wrong. The Law is a much more accurate and sensitive guide. This was the ultimate purpose of the Law. When the people compared their actions with the Law they would realise that they fell short of God's standard and that they needed God to forgive them for their sins. No one can fully obey the Law because we have inherited sin from Adam and Eve. The Law also shows us that sin cannot be ignored, and that it can only be forgiven on the basis of a sacrifice. The system of sacrifices was given to teach the people that forgiveness could only be given on the basis of the death of a sacrifice in their place.

Key Lesson: God gave His Law to the nation of Israel through Moses

God Law shows us what is right and wrong (this is more accurate than our conscience) and what God is like. When we compare ourselves with God's Law we realise how sinful we are and how much we need God's forgiveness.