

Living *the* Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 21:1–32, Exod. 22:16–23:33, 2 Kings 19:35, Matt. 5:38–48, Rom. 12:19, Matt. 16:27.*

Memory Text: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: “You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves” ’ ” (*Exodus 20:22, 23, NKJV*).

God desired His people to be different from the surrounding nations. He wanted them established as a devoted community of faith who would live under His leadership and authority. Everyone would be subject to His law. Judges were to be appointed as administrators of the law, and the priests were to teach it. Parents also played a crucial role.

In any culture, the laws reveal the ideals, goals, intent, and character of the lawmaker. For example, when Pharaoh ordered every Hebrew male baby killed, this law revealed what he was like: evil. In contrast, if a king made a law that every 18-year-old in the kingdom would be awarded a free higher education, many would consider this evidence of the king's generosity and desire for his country to prosper.

God's law reveals Him, that is, His goodness, love, values, righteousness, and His restraints against evil. As the law is holy and just, so is God. While creating space for an abundant life, the law also helps protect us from dangers and calamities. Respect for God, for each other, and for life's values were the basis of His legislative system.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 30.

The Code of the Covenant

At Sinai, with the giving of His law, God set the foundation for teaching His people how, through connection with Him, they could live holy lives. But the principles of the law needed to be applied in everyday life, so God gave them additional laws, the so-called “Code of the Covenant.” It was the responsibility of judges to watch over these laws and to apply them correctly.

“The minds of the people, blinded and debased by slavery and heathenism, were not prepared to appreciate fully the far-reaching principles of God's ten precepts. That the obligations of the Decalogue might be more fully understood and enforced, additional precepts were given, illustrating and applying the principles of the Ten Commandments. These laws were called judgments, both because they were framed in infinite wisdom and equity and because the magistrates were to give judgment according to them. Unlike the Ten Commandments, they were delivered privately to Moses, who was to communicate them to the people.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 310.

Read Exodus 21:1–32. What specific regulations were given regarding Hebrew slaves, homicide, and bodily injuries?

The Code of the Covenant is described in several chapters (*Exod. 21:1–23:19*). All these regulations and laws were issued to stop the avalanche of evil and to build an orderly society.

The slavery laws were special and should not be confused with the vicious and evil practice of modern or medieval slavery. Hebrew slaves were, in fact, protected and valued. In modern and medieval societies, servants and slaves were the property of their owner, who could do whatever they wished with them. In contrast, biblical laws regulated things differently. Servitude was limited to six years (*Exod. 21:1, 2; Jer. 34:8–22*), and in the seventh year, all slaves had to be liberated unless they wanted to stay with their master. Masters also had to give them Sabbaths off (*Exod. 20:9, 10*) and provide for their basic needs.

Though, in most of the world, the evil practice of institutionalized slavery has for the most part been abolished, what are ways in which some of the principles of it still exist, and what can we do, in our own limited sphere, to fight against these principles?

More Laws

In God's mercy, He taught the judges how to deal with people in various situations regarding property rights. Several case studies are enumerated, indicating what to do if a bull attacked a neighbor's bull, if people stole a domestic animal and sold it, if animals grazed in the field or vineyard of another owner, if an item a person borrowed was stolen from him, or if a hired animal was injured or died (*Exod. 21:33–22:15*).

Read Exodus 22:16–23:9. What issues were dealt with in these laws and how?

God's laws included different issues. There were specific regulations against putting down or humiliating people. He did not want any kind of exploitation. In His mercy, God corrects the sinful tendencies of the human heart and restrains people's natural inclinations. Society was to be kept safe, evil eliminated, and good interpersonal relationships cultivated. Justice and love must rule all actions.

Read Exodus 23:10–19. What important issues were dealt with here?

The Sabbath and the festivals were about worship and were reminders of crucial events in salvation history. Worship was carefully regulated because this was the theological basis for all other activities. The Sabbath was established at Creation (*Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:8–11*), was connected to Israel's deliverance and redemption (*Deut. 5:12–15*), and, in a powerful way, points to worshiping God as our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord (*Mark 2:27, 28*).

Meanwhile, there were three crucial festivals that Israel was required to celebrate each year: (1) the Passover or the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the spring (usually about mid-March to mid-April); (2) Pentecost or the Feast of Harvest (or the Feast of Weeks) seven weeks after the previous festival, thus beginning 50 days later; and (3) the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths) or the Feast of Ingathering in the fall (usually about mid-September to mid-October; *see also Exod. 34:18–26, Lev. 23:4–44, Num. 28:16–29:40, Deut. 16:1–16*).

God's Original Plan

Read Exodus 23:20–33. What methods did God desire to use for conquering the Promised Land?

It was not God's intention for the Israelites to fight for their new territory; it was to be given to them. It had been promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and should have been received as God's special gift to Israel.

The model for the conquest of the Promised Land was demonstrated during the crossing of the Red Sea. God fought for His people and gave them total victory over those planning to kill them (*Exod. 14:13, 14*). The Egyptians were defeated because the Lord miraculously intervened. Similarly, in the time of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, God also defeated the vast, heavily equipped, and well-trained Assyrian army, but without the Israelites having to fight. God granted victory because King Hezekiah believed God's word given to him through the prophet Isaiah (*2 Kings 19:35, Isa. 37:36*).

God informed Abraham that the Promised Land would not be immediately given to his posterity, but only after 400 years (*Gen. 15:13–16*). Why? The reason was related to the wickedness of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. God was mercifully working with those people and gave them another period of grace to repent. However, they continued in their rebellion against God and His values, so when the iniquity of those nations was complete, God was ready to give their territory to the Hebrews as a new homeland.

In addition, God promised that He would drive the nations out ahead of Israel by two unusual but very effective methods: (1) by sending terror and fear upon wicked nations, and (2) with hornets that would drive the people away. Before the Israelites arrived in the new territory, their enemies would abandon the place, and "turn their backs and run" (*Exod. 23:27, 28, NIV*).

The crucial role in the conquest of the Promised Land is played by the Angel of God. This Messenger was Christ, who guided Israel, conquered territories, and protected them. He was the pillar of cloud guiding them during the day and the pillar of fire during the night. Israel had to pay careful attention and listen to Him because He had divine authority (*Exod. 23:21*). Defiance of God's will and unbelief in His leadership would complicate their advancement.

What does this idea, that of God giving those pagans many years to change their ways, teach us about God's grace and also about the limits of that grace for those who refuse to accept it?

An Eye for an Eye

Read Matthew 5:38–48. How does Jesus interpret the meaning of the retaliation law? How should we apply it today?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ cited texts from the Old Testament, texts that people were surely familiar with. However, He was speaking against the current rabbinical interpretations, which over the centuries had moved away from the original purpose of these laws. That is, human tradition not only hid the purpose of God’s Word but in some cases (think of the Sabbath regulations and what they had done to the Sabbath commandment) had perverted their intent and meanings. By His words, Jesus was restoring the original meanings of these laws.

On the Mount of Beatitudes, by pointing His hearers back to the texts’ original intent and meaning, Jesus was seeking to correct some of these false interpretations.

The text from Exodus 21:24 that talks about an “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” was quoted in Matthew 5:38 (“you have heard . . . but I say to you”) and referred to the *lex talionis*, the so-called retaliation law. This verse is also used in other places in the Bible (*Lev. 24:20, Deut. 19:21*).

The original intention of this law was formulated against any personal revenge. It was to stop blood feuds, or retaliation without an investigation first. Injury had to be evaluated by judges, and then a proper monetary compensation would be established and paid. This practice was done in order to stop people from “taking the law into their own hands.” Justice was to be done, but it had to be done according to God’s law.

Jesus Christ, who gave these social laws to Moses, knew the purpose of this law; therefore, He could apply it in an objective way, according to its original intention. The motive behind it was to bring justice and reconciliation, and to restore peace.

One could argue that, in a sense, justice implies a kind of vengeance. The proper application of these laws was, it seemed, an attempt to find the right balance between the ideas of justice and vengeance.

How should the realization that one day justice will come help you deal with all the injustice that we see in the world now?

Vengeance

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ ” (Rom. 12:19, *ESV*; see also Deut. 32:35).

What promise and command are found in these verses, and how are they closely related?

Until the Lord brings the justice so lacking now, it was the duty of the judges in ancient Israel to implement the law and to determine a just punishment when harm or injury occurred. But they needed the facts first. The problem was that the teachers of the law in Christ’s time applied this law in a way that opened the door for personal vengeance. By doing so, the principle was taken out of its context, and the initial purpose was missed. Consequently, they were defending what the law actually forbade.

Read Matthew 6:4, 6; Matthew 16:27; Luke 6:23; and 2 Timothy 4:8. What do these texts tell us about how Jesus viewed the principles of reward and punishment?

Jesus was not against the principle of reward and punishment. Justice is a matter of principle; it is a crucial part of life. However, no individual is to take the role of judge, jury, and “executioner” upon himself or herself. How easy it would be for us to pervert justice! It is not up to us to repay harm. If some evil is to be addressed, this must be performed by an objective court; it is the work of judges.

In this context Jesus tells us to be as perfect as our “Father in heaven is perfect.” How can we be as perfect as God Himself? Unselfish love is the overarching characteristic of God. He teaches His followers how to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them. True perfection is to love, to be forgiving, and to be merciful (*Luke 6:36*), even to those who do not deserve it. This principle, and the actions it leads to, is what it means to reflect God’s character.

What are ways in which, day by day, we can learn to love in the way that we are commanded to? Why does this always involve a death to self?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 310–314, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

Because we live in the territory of our enemy, it is no wonder we may be hurt in real life by his skillful and deceptive schemes. Who among us has not known pain and suffering, all brought about because of sin and the sinful fallen world in which we live? It’s just part of life now, unfortunately. However, God gives us power to cope.

“The precious Saviour will send help just when we need it. The way to heaven is consecrated by His footprints. Every thorn that wounds our feet has wounded His. Every cross that we are called to bear He has borne before us. The Lord permits conflicts, to prepare the soul for peace. The time of trouble is a fearful ordeal for God’s people; but it is the time for every true believer to look up, and by faith he may see the bow of promise encircling him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 633.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ People through the centuries have struggled with the fact that the Lord had those pagan nations driven out of their land, and sometimes even wiped out. It is, indeed, troubling. However, how should realizing that God’s love must also manifest justice help us trust that, even in these events, His love, not just His justice, was revealed?
- ❷ Dwell more on the fact that right after all Jesus’ words about loving others, even our enemies, and even those who hate you, He says to us, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (*Matt. 5:48, NKJV*). Why would Jesus have this command follow right after these other commands? What was He telling us here about what it means not only to be “perfect” but to be as perfect as “your Father in heaven”?
- ❸ The apostle Paul had a positive and uplifting attitude toward God’s law and its functions, yet he was against the misuse of the law. What does his statement mean that “you are not under the law, but under grace” (*Rom. 6:14, NIV*)? What are ways that we can misuse the law?
- ❹ What is the difference between justice and vengeance? Are they completely different concepts or just different manifestations of the same idea? How do we know if our desire for justice is not really a desire for vengeance?

All Things Working Together

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Carl Casey, a helicopter pilot and science teacher in Alaska, had a stroke at the age of 51. He couldn't understand why. Long before becoming a Seventh-day Adventist, he had stopped eating unclean meat after seeing that the Bible spoke against it and reading scientific evidence that backed it up.

The stroke shattered Carl's life in Fairbanks. He couldn't walk or work.

Then he read in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (*NKJV*). He had read the verse many times, but now it took on a new meaning. He saw it didn't say "all things are good for those who love God" but rather "all things work together for good to those who love God."

Carl stopped asking why. Instead, he asked God to use his stroke to win souls in Alaska. He wanted to be able to echo Joseph and say, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (*Gen. 50:20*).

Carl began to look for opportunities to witness in Alaska, which is a challenging mission field with a difficult history; long, cold winters; and limited roads and other infrastructure across a vast territory. Only about 3,000 Adventists live among the population of 733,000. Carl quickly realized that his wheelchair put him in a unique position. It was hard for people not to notice him. With their attention, he spoke glowingly about his love for God.

People responded with surprise. "You're in a wheelchair, and you care about God?" they asked.

"You betcha!" Carl replied. Then he extolled God's great love. He shared Romans 3:23, which says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and John 3:16, which says all who believe in Jesus have eternal life. He encouraged people to read the Bible daily and grow close to God, believing that once a relationship was formed, everything else would fall into place, including doctrines like the Sabbath and teachings such as the Levitical diet.

Carl readily admits that a healthy diet didn't prevent his stroke. "My stroke was not from eating unhealthily but just the result of living in a sinful world," he said. "I'm lucky to be alive. Most people die after a stroke like this." He still recommends and follows the Levitical diet as the path to a longer, healthier life.



Nearly a decade after his stroke, he can say that lives have been changed because of the stroke.

"I will see people in heaven because I had this stroke," Carl said. "People will be there who wouldn't have been there otherwise. So, all things work together for good to those who love God."