

The Christian Covenant

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The Law of the Covenant Given

Exodus 19:16-25 records the famous event of Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai to receive the Law of the covenant. Chapter 20 records what is commonly called the Ten Commandments. Chapters 21 through 24 contain numerous other commandments regarding servants, violent crimes, property rights, various other crimes, etc.

Many further commands regarding the tabernacle and the priests are recorded in chapters 25 through 30. The book of Leviticus continues with laws regarding sacrifices and offerings. Altogether there were over 600 individual laws or commandments given to the people of Israel in connection with their covenant with God.

The Covenant of Law was for the Jews

In Deuteronomy 5:1ff, as Moses rehearsed the commandments given by God, he declared that that covenant was between God and the nation of Israel, not with other nations. That covenant was not intended for all people for all time. Exodus 20:12 commands, "Honor your father and your mother," and then gives the reason for the command: "that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord our God gives you."

God had specifically brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and would later bring them into the promised land of Canaan. Thus this command (and all the Law) was specifically intended for the people of Israel at that time until the coming of the Messiah and a new covenant.

A New Covenant Foretold

Jeremiah prophesied these words of God in Jeremiah 31:31-33: "Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Jesus Fulfilled the Law

The gospels of the New Testament record the birth and ministry of Jesus, the Messiah. He lived under that Law of Moses, faithfully obeyed the Law, and commanded others of that time to obey the Law. But Jesus Himself said in Luke 16:16, "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it."

Jesus spoke of fulfilling the Law when He said in Matthew 5:17-18, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished."

The word "destroy" is from the Greek word *kataluo* (Strong #2647), meaning "to destroy utterly, to overthrow completely, . . . to fail in purpose" (Vine's Exp. Dict.). The same word is used in Acts 5:38-39 when Gamaliel said that if the preaching of the apostles was "of God, you will not be able to overthrow it."

Indeed Christ did not destroy or overthrow the Law; it did not fail in purpose. Jesus said in Luke 16:17, "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail." The Law did not fail; it did exactly what it was intended to do: bring the world to Christ. In that it truly succeeded!

The word “fulfill” in v17 is from the Greek word *pleroo* (Strong #4137), meaning “to fill, to make full, complete” (Vine’s Exp. Dict.). Webster’s Dictionary defines fulfill as: “1. To bring to realization. 2. To carry out; perform. 3. To satisfy (requirements, obligations, etc.). 4. To bring to an end.” The word “accomplished” in v18 is from the Greek word *ginomai* (Strong #1096), meaning “to become, to come to pass, happen” (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon).

Christ came to pay the debt to law, a debt that man could not pay. Colossians 2:14 teaches that Christ’s death “cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

Thus Christ in His death for all mankind satisfied the requirements of the Law. Those who are in Christ are no longer bound by such; our debt has been fully paid. (See also Luke 24:44 "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.")

The Apostles Taught that the Law was Fulfilled

Following the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, the inspired apostles taught that the Law of Moses was no longer in effect. In Romans 7:4, Paul wrote, “Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God.” In v6 he said, “But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

In Galatians 3:24-25, Paul said, “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” In Ephesians 2:14-15, he said that Christ “broke down the barrier of the dividing wall [between Jews and Gentiles] by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances.”

In 2 Corinthians 3:6ff, Paul spoke of the Law as “the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones” (V7) and as a “ministry of condemnation” (V9). He referred to such as “that which fades away” (v11) and “the old covenant (v14). In v6, Paul said we are “servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

Finally, consider the letter to the Hebrews, the very subject of which is a comparison of the old and new covenants. The writer said in 1:1-2: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” The inspired writer then, in the remainder of the letter, explains that the way of Christ is far superior to the Old Law of Moses.

Hebrews 7:11 speaks of Christ as another priest who would not be needed “if perfection is through the Levitical priesthood.” But since such was not possible, “of necessity there takes place a change of law also” (v12). V18 speaks of “setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness.” V22 says that Christ then is the “guarantee of a better covenant.”

Hebrews 8:6-7 states that Christ “is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.” Then in v13 it says, “When He said, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete.” Hebrews 9:1 and 9:18 speaks of the “first covenant” compared to the “new covenant” in 9:15 and 12:24. Hebrews 10:1 says that the Law was simply a “shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things.” 10:9 says, “He takes away the first in order to establish the second.”

Are the Ten Commandments Separate from the Law of Moses?

Some, while agreeing that the Law of Moses has been replaced, nevertheless contend that the Ten Commandments were intended to constitute an eternal moral law, that they were separate from the Law and covenant of Moses and that they are therefore intended to continue in effect for all time. This, however, is simply not consistent with what the Bible says. The Ten Commandments were indeed a part of the Law of Moses and were indistinguishable from the covenant with Israel; they have thus ceased to be the rule of God's people today. Numerous passages clearly show this to be the case:

- Exodus 34:27-28 "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."
- Deuteronomy 4:13 "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone."
- Deuteronomy 5:2-3 [Before rehearsing the Ten Commandments] "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today."
- Deuteronomy 9:9 "When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water."
- 1 Kings 8:9, 21 "There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the sons of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. . . And there I have set a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord, which He made with our fathers when He brought them from the land of Egypt."
- 2 Chronicles 6:11 "And there I have set the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord, which He made with the sons of Israel."
- 2 Corinthians 3:3-15 The "tables of stone" are given through Moses to Israel and are contrasted to the "new covenant."
- Hebrews 9:1-4 "Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. For there was . . . the ark of the covenant . . . in which was . . . the tables of the covenant."

Law of God and Covenant Identical

Those who promote sabbath-keeping and/or keeping the Ten Commandments claim there is a distinction between the "Law of God/Ten Commandments" and the "Ceremonial Covenant with Israel through Moses." And yet numerous passages show that not to be so and that these terms are often interchangeable (there is also no reference in all of OT to "ceremonial" law or covenant):

- 1 Kings 2:3 Law of Moses included everything God commanded.
- 1 Chronicles 16:40; 2 Chronicles 31:3; Luke 2:23-24 Commands concerning sacrifice are from "the Law of the Lord."
- 2 Chronicles 35:26 "Acts of Josiah and his deeds of devotion [are] written in the law of the Lord."
- Ezra 7:6,10 "The law of Moses [is that] which the Lord God of Israel had given" and is also known as "the law of the Lord."
- Nehemiah 8:1-18 References to the law of the Lord given through Moses.
- Nehemiah 10:34-39 Commands about giving, etc. taken from "the law."
- Psalm 78:10 "Covenant of God" and "His law" used interchangeably.

- Malachi 4:4 “Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel” (reference to the 10C given in Horeb).
- Matthew 12:5 "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent?" (reference to Numbers 28:9-10).
- Mark 7:9-10 The commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," is called both “the commandment of God” and that which was spoken by Moses.
- John 1:17 “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”
- John 7:19 "Did not Moses give you the Law, and yet none of you carries out the Law? Why do you seek to kill Me?"
- 2 Corinthians 3:3-15 When you read the 10 commandments, you read Moses.
- Galatians 4:25 Old covenant is referred to as that which came from Mount Sinai in Arabia.

Command to Keep Sabbath Not Eternal

The command to keep the sabbath was not given before the covenant with Israel and is thus not an eternal command intended for all time:

- Exodus 16:22-23 “And so it was, on the sixth day, that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. And all the rulers of the congregation came and told Moses. Then he said to them, This is what the Lord has said: Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning.” The complete passage (v23-30) shows that they had not been keeping the sabbath before this time.
- Deuteronomy 5:2-3 "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today." That covenant included keeping the sabbath, and had not been made with people prior to that time.
- Nehemiah 9:13-14 At Sinai, God “made known to them Thy holy sabbath” and other commandments (not before and thus not eternal).
- Ezekiel 20:10-12 "So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live. And also I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them.” (It is argued that since "sabbaths" is plural it cannot refer to the weekly sabbath; however, the weekly sabbath is also plural in Exodus 31:13.)
- Galatians 3:17 The Law came 430 years after Abraham and thus not established at creation.
- Colossians 2:14-17 Sabbaths were “a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

Conclusion

The focus of the Law of Moses was primarily upon works and obligations. The new covenant, however, is centered around Jesus Christ. Salvation comes today, not by observing and perfectly keeping all the commandments of the Law, for such cannot be done (Romans 3:23). Salvation instead comes by faith in the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

One of the great themes of the book of Romans is that salvation is by faith, not by works of the Law. In Romans 1:16, Paul states that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the “power unto salvation, for the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

He then says in Romans 8:1-4, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did; sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”