



Lesson 4: We Need a Savior

Lesson Introduction:

In our last lesson we examined the calling and life of Abraham. God graciously turned to Abraham as He advanced his plan for human redemption. In Abraham, we saw how authentic faith and genuine trust in God is the only appropriate response to the grace of God. Obedience is only possible when it arises from true belief in God and His Word. Abraham's successful actions were preceded by genuine faith and trust. Today we will see how God's plan for redemption unfolds more in the lives of Abraham's descendants. The nation that Abraham and Sarah founded by faith in God receives the law of God and sees the mighty works of God but often fails to maintain trust in God. Their consistent failure to live according to the call and plan of God not only reveals the persistence of human sin but also the need for a savior. As we prepare to commemorate again the death and resurrection of our savior on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, let us be mindful of why he had to come and die.

Read the Text: Deuteronomy 28:1-2 (read along with Exodus 19:3-8)

Understanding the Text:

The Presentation of the Law

The law of God is given throughout Exodus and on through Deuteronomy. These books contain both narrative and legal material as God chose to convey his law both in story and in command. God's law is also given to the descendants of Abraham after a dramatic and miraculous demonstration of both God's commitment to Israel and his desire to save. God forewarned Abraham that his descendants would, for a time, forsake their promised land and live as slaves in Egypt (Genesis 15:13-14). Abraham knew well the dangers of Egypt (Genesis 12) but his great-grandsons fully embraced Egypt as a source of salvation when they faced severe famine. Their own sin and jealousy had caused Joseph to make a new life in Egypt and the descendants of Jacob's sons remained in that land for 400 years. Their savior, Egypt, quickly became their slave master and they began to cry out to God to save them from their captivity (Exodus 2:23-25).

In response to their cries and on account of the covenant with Abraham, God sent Moses to lead them to freedom. They miraculously exited Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14). In addition to this, God caused the sea to swallow up their enemies before their eyes. God led them visibly with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God miraculously provided food in the desert and led them to the land He had promised them. In spite of all this visible proof and provision, the people of Israel still doubted God often. In fact, Exodus alone has four major accounts of the people of Israel expressing doubt and unfaithfulness in God (Exodus 14:11-12; 16:3; 17:3; 32:1-4). These scenes of Israel's unfaithfulness in Exodus culminate in idolatry as they literally make a god from their own strength and resources simply because they grew impatient with the Lord after some days of waiting on Him and Moses. God's anger toward Israel is clearly seen in Exodus 32:8-10 where He expresses to Moses a desire to destroy them all. Nevertheless, God calls them His chosen people in Exodus 19:5-6. Though God has a consistent righteous anger toward sin He also expresses and consistent gracious desire to save.

It is in this context that God give Israel His law. This Old Covenant law is composed of (by most counts) 613 individual commands or instructions which are traditionally divided into three categories:

- Moral Law (laws establishing the ethics and behavior of Israel)
- Civil Law (laws governing the ancient nation of Israel)
- Ceremonial Laws (laws addressing the religion of Israel)

These laws were given so that God's people might know how to be exactly what they were called to be, the people of God. The laws cover a wide range of issues from the well-known "Ten Commandments" to obscure laws regarding agriculture, architecture, fashion, and food.

It is important to remember that even though God's anger often burned against Israel, the laws were not given out of anger to punish the people but rather they were given out of love to bless the people. The laws represent a higher, better way of living for Israel. Their laws, customs, and ethics will not be derived from pagan, fallen nations. Rather, they are given a heavenly, exalted law. In the law, they are shown a picture of how God's people should behave individually, in community, and in worship. No other tribe or nation was given the law. Rather, Israel, as a kingdom of priests, was to make the law of God known to the nations by living before them according to God's decrees. Thus, even in the Old Testament, God had a desire to bring the nations to salvation by working through the priestly nation of Israel. Their lifestyles were to be testimony of God.

Unfortunately, just as Israel often failed to be faithful to God in their desert wanderings, they persistently failed to keep the law of God even in the promised land. God ultimately judged the generation He delivered from captivity by refusing them entry into the promised land. They must die in the desert and then their children will inherit the land. The law, then, did not provide the remedy for man's fallen, sinful nature. In fact, the law exposed it further.

The Problem of the Law

As mentioned above, the problem with the law was not in the law itself but with humanity's inability to keep the law (Hebrews 8:7-8). Looking back on Israel and the Law, Paul understood that Israel was not redeemed by merely having the law. Rather, obedience to the whole of the law was necessary for redemption in the Old Covenant (Romans 2:13). In Romans 3, Paul affirms an Old Testament declaration that no one is declared righteous by the law because no one has kept the law perfectly. Paul summarizes the Old Testament understanding of righteousness and judgement in Romans 2:6 (which is actually a quote based in Proverbs 24:12): "God will repay each person according to what they have done." Since all sin, all deserve condemnation.

The idea that obedience to the whole law (and not merely partial obedience) was necessary for righteousness was seen as far back as Genesis 4:7 where God rejected Cain's sacrifice but instructed him that he would be accepted by God if he did "what is right." Yet, if he did "not do what is right" he would be separated from God. God also declares this to two generations of Israelites first in Exodus 19:5 and then again in Deuteronomy 28:1 where God says, "if you obey me fully . . ." Every law must be kept perfectly if the righteousness lost in Eden was to be gained again. This was impossible for humanity to accomplish even though some, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, strived for perfection.

God knew that humanity would be unable to fully obey His law. Thus, alongside the law He established the sacrificial system so that humans could have an acceptable but temporary and limited method of atonement. The word atonement has a basic meaning of "to cover." Thus, the blood of animals was spilled on an altar to cover a person's sin. God shows humanity this concept in Genesis 3 when he slaughters animals to make a covering for Adam and Eve since their own attempt at making a covering was insufficient and unsuccessful. Now, in the law, God gives the people a formal process for making atonement. As Kenneth Grider writes, "In the Old Testament times the priest drew blood from animals until no life was left in them – and with that blood made atonement for the sins of the people."ⁱ The writer of Hebrews observed that in regards to the work of atonement, the Old Covenant priesthood never ceased working because there was always sin which needed covering among the people (Hebrews 10:11). Exodus 30:10 predicted an annual need for atonement and the book of Leviticus is chapter after chapter describing the need for and the process of animal sacrifice on account of human sin.

The law is not the problem, but our inability to keep the whole of the law makes the law a source of condemnation rather than redemption for humanity. When we consider the millions of animals that must have been sacrificed over the generations and all the blood that was spilled in the Tabernacle and Temple yet no lasting redemption was experienced, we are forced to reckon with the severity of our sin and the offense it must be to God. This is a blood-soaked reality yet this reckoning is getting us closer to God's purpose in giving the law.

The Purpose of the Law

God did not make a mistake by giving us the law. Our inability to keep it does not reflect an inability on behalf of God or a deficiency in his law. God's law did actually fulfill the purposes for which it was given. God gave the law so that mankind may know better the heart of God, become well aware of our sinful condition, and understand our great need for a savior.

First, the law of God reveals the heart of God. In the law, God is showing us who He is and what He values. There is a tendency among Christians to accept the moral laws of the Old Testament but set aside the civil and ceremonial laws. Some of the laws sound so silly or irrelevant to us that we scarcely make the effort to find their connection to us today. Yet we must realize that every law in the Old Testament is the Word of God and flows from the heart of God. Although we may not (and should not) follow every law in the Old Testament literally, we must examine every law that God gave and seek to discover principle behind the law that originated in the heart of God. Each law is an expression of a great theological truth or principle established by God and we must strive to uncover that principle in our study. For example, the architectural law found in Deuteronomy 22:8 about building a parapet around the roof of a home is not something we do today even though it is a clear instruction. So rather than dismissing the law or seeking first to fulfill the law literally we need to examine the principle or value from God's heart that informed this specific law. The parapet was a safety measure for the home. God promoted safety in architecture because God loves life and value preserving life. The principle here is that we must consider the value and preservation of life even in our mundane decisions (such as designing a home). Thus, to truly obey and honor that particular law today, we do may not build parapets but we do consider how our choices impact the life of others. With this in view, we see that the law is not an obstacle to reaching God, the law is a divine tool for knowing God. The law does not hide God, it reveals God. In the law we see the heart of the lawgiver and have opportunity to pattern our own lives after God, to adopt for ourselves the values and principles of God.

Second, the law makes us truly aware of our sinful condition. Paul affirms this in Romans 3:20. When we examine God's standards for living and then examine our own lives and habits, we see clearly that we do not meet the standard that God has set for righteousness. Thus, our unrighteousness becomes abundantly evident. God does not show us our unrighteousness in order to discourage us into hell but so that we might be spurred on toward faith and trust in God. When I understand how unable I am, my attention is drawn to how great God is. My unrighteousness is seen by holding up a picture of His righteousness. The covering that I tried to make for myself (as my ancestors Adam and Eve did) is revealed as not good enough. I must seek after the covering provided by God.

Now we can come to the third purpose of the law, preparing us to receive and accept Christ. In making us aware of our sin, the law is also driving us into the powerful but nail-scarred hands of the savior. The law lets me know that I live in a life-threatening crisis from which I cannot escape by my own means. I cannot save myself from the mess that I'm in. How can I be saved from this!?! Through Jesus. Paul admits in Galatians 3:24 that the law was given to bring us to Christ. When we reach the end of our rope and realize that we cannot pull ourselves out of the mire by our own bootstraps, we must turn our attention and devotion to the one who can deliver us. Just as God raised up a deliverer for Israel when they were in inescapable bondage in Egypt, God has provided a deliverer for us who live in inescapable bondage to sin. The law prepares us to believe in our Savior and trust in his power to save.

Apply the Text:

The New Covenant and its New Testament are not in competition or opposition to the Old Covenant and its Old Testament. The Old Covenant is the very foundation for the New Covenant and we cannot possibly understand the New Testament without grasping the Old Testament. To be truly faithful to the Old Covenant, we must fully accept the New Covenant. Likewise, we cannot fully appreciate or realize our New Covenant reality without comprehending the Old Covenant. Even when the New Testament seems to be dismissing an individual law from the Old Testament (like Matthew 5:38) we must consider how the New Testament seeks to honor the heart of the lawmaker by giving His principles and values a New Covenant expression. Our responsibility as New Covenant believers grappling with Old Covenant law is not to determine which ones to follow and which ones to set aside. Our responsibility is to discover the heart of God in the law and seek to honor His values and principles each day.

In the Old Testament, obedience was pursued because people were seeking to be saved. For us in the New Covenant, we commit to obedience not because we are chasing salvation but because we are already saved! We are saved by grace through faith apart from any work we have accomplished. Now our attention is given to honoring our savior, not earning our salvation.

As we come nearer to Good Friday, when atonement was achieved once and for all not by the blood of bulls and goats but by the blood of the Son of God, we should remember how impossible eternal atonement was before Christ bled and died on the cross. Animal sacrifice was a continuous activity. People had to literally take an animal to die in their place. They had to watch it bleed and hear it cry and see it die on their behalf at least once a year. Though I have not seen the horror of animal sacrifice, my sin is no less ugly or offensive to God. Let our study of the Old Testament law and sacrificial system make us increasingly grateful for the atoning work of Christ on the cross. May we never take it lightly or observe Good Friday casually. Let us appreciate the work of Christ more and more.

Conclusion:

We have intentionally turned to the Old Testament in these lessons to prepare ourselves for Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday because the story of Christ's significance begins there, long before he appeared in the manger or died on the cross and arose from the tomb. Genesis looks forward to Christ as the one who will finally crush the head of the deceiving serpent. Exodus – Deuteronomy look forward to Christ as the one who will finally live perfectly according to the law and then die on behalf of all those who did not or cannot. The story continues through the Old Testament and we will find greater understanding and appreciation for the cross and the resurrection as we examine the historical foundation for our present and eternal salvation. Next time we will see our journey to the cross passes through defeated lands and by exiled people who are looking, along with us, for the coming Messiah.

ⁱ J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 323.