

The Law of God

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The writer of Hebrews tells us,

“It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins... ‘Sacrifice and offering You did not desire... In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure.’” (Heb. 10:4-6)

Why then did God institute the system of sacrifices and offerings of blood that we find in the Old Testament? Though we seldom contemplate it, this is a *fact* of both the Old and New Testaments that God was indeed the author of the system of blood sacrifices and offerings. And while we may not be able to exhaust every possible answer to this question, the main ones we do find in the Bible provide strong encouragement, great comfort and dire warning!

Let us first consider again the effort to which God went to confirm the Old Testament system of blood sacrifices and offerings. From the time of Abel (Gen. 4:4) to Noah (Gen. 8:20) to Abraham (Gen. 15:9-10), we find men bringing animals to God and sacrificing them in order to be acceptable to, pleasing and blessed by God. And God graciously responded to these men by making covenants or agreements with them.

Then came Moses. He was chosen by God to lead His chosen people, the Israelites (descendants of Abraham and beneficiaries of God’s covenant with Abraham), out of Egypt. (Ex. 12:37, etc.) After the people had left Egypt and come to Mount Sinai, the Lord gave Moses the laws by which the people of Israel were to abide. (Ex. 20:1-17, etc.) Among the laws were the rules for the Levitical priesthood and its ritual service of the tabernacle (temple) and the rituals and schedule of blood sacrifices and offerings. (Lev. 1:1-2, etc.)

After Moses and his successor Joshua had died, there was a series of judges who sought to bring Israel back to obedience to God’s laws and ways but, so the writer of the book of Judges tells us, “because there was no king in Israel, every man did what was right in his own eyes.” (Jdgs. 21:25) Then followed the kings of Israel. Saul was the first and ended his reign by seeking out a spiritist (medium) to bring forth the spirit of dead Samuel – a direct violation of God’s law. (1 Sam. 28:6-7, Dt. 18:10-11) David ruled Israel next as “a man after God’s heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) but his reign was characterized by bloodshed and violence, even from his own children. (2 Sam. 15:10, etc.) Then Solomon ruled Israel but allowed himself in his old age to be led astray by his pagan wives. (1 Ki. 11:4) After Solomon died, the kingdom divided into the ten northern tribes in Israel and the two southern tribes in Judah. Each of these kingdoms had a series of kings and each king’s legacy was measured in terms of departing from or restoring and walking in the ways of the Lord. This culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of most survivors to Babylon. (2 Chr. 36:17, 20)

Prophets arose at various times during the times of the judges and of the kings to call the people to hear the voice of the Lord. (Jer. 26:13, etc.) Some performed miracles (2 Ki. 2:14, etc.) while others rebuked a corrupt priesthood. (Isa. 28:7, Mal. 1:6, etc.) But these prophets all knew that there was a salvation coming to Israel at some time in the future (Isa. 46:12-13, etc.) – and many spoke plainly and prolifically about a coming *Messiah*. (Isa. 53:2-9, etc.)

And it here that we find the most prominent answer to the question of why God would institute the system of blood sacrifices and offerings. In one sense, the whole system is one giant finger pointing specifically and precisely at Messiah or, as He is more familiarly known to us,

the Christ. “Without shedding of blood there is no remission [removal of or rescue from the consequences and penalties] of sins.” (Heb. 9:22) Since the blood of bulls and goats could not remove our guilt that comes as a result of our sins. (Heb. 10:4), a better sacrifice is required. In that capacity God sent His Son, “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.” (Heb. 1:3) to be the ultimate and only sacrifice that would ever be needed. “With His own blood He entered [heaven’s – not earth’s] Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” (Heb. 9:12) In this sense, every sacrifice brought to God under the old system He instituted was intended to direct one’s heart to the Most High God and one’s expectations of deliverance and salvation toward the coming Messiah.

But then came the Pharisees. These were fundamentalists and traditionalists (radical conservatives) intent on keeping the people from violating the Law of Moses. They built up a “hedge” around the Law with their Targums (commentaries), Midrashim and Mishnah (writings, essays, interpretations, explanations and amplifications of exactly what each law meant and required of the people). However, as Jesus publicly, repeatedly and soundly rebuked them, this produced mostly hypocrisy and the inability of most people even to find their way to God. “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Jesus proclaimed, “For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.” (Mt. 23:13) For this and because Jesus was drawing the people away from them, they delivered Him to the Roman governor to be brutally crucified. (Jn. 11:51-53, Mt. 27:1-2)

There is a second and deeper answer to the question of why God would institute a system of blood sacrifices and offerings. But we must first consider the lengths to which God went to institute this system. From the time of Moses (not even counting the many centuries in which God received sacrifices without having a legal system in place), the system was in place for 1,500 years. It would probably still be in place today if God had not allowed (sent?) a Roman general named Titus to sack Jerusalem and utterly destroy the temple in 70 A.D. Later, Muslim occupation and fanatic defense of the mosque they’ve built on the temple site in Jerusalem has left the Jews unable to resume animal sacrifices and left the zealous orthodox Jews wailing at the remnants of the outer temple’s western wall. One would think the Jews would find a clue in the fact that God is apparently just not interested in any more animal sacrifices or in having a building built for Him by men. (also see Acts 17:24) The sacrifice of Messiah was and always will be the only sacrifice for sin and redemption that is – or ever will be – required, acceptable and pleasing to God.

But why would God establish and sustain this system for *fifteen centuries*? Why would so many lives rise and fall during its existence? Why did God place so much emphasis on sacrifice, offering and ritual for so long a time? There are some today who simply dismiss the law of Moses as if it had absolutely nothing in any way to offer the follower of Christ and God. But it seems unwise to entirely jettison something into which God invested one and a half *millennia*!

As we answer this question, let us take care that we avoid that common knee-jerk reaction of legalism as well as the flip side of that coin, total anti-legalism. We are neither to return to *obeying* the law (Gal. 5:4, etc.) nor are we to indulge our flesh and *violate* God’s laws. (Gal. 5:13, etc.) Rather, we must live by the Spirit of God and, as did Christ Jesus, *fulfill* the law. (Gal. 5:16) Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” (Mt. 5:17) And John tells us, “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” (1 Jn. 3:8) The law is a work of *God* and not a

work of the devil – Christ does not need to destroy the law. Sin *is* a work of the devil and Christ is completely committed to eradicating and destroying all sin.

Paul pointed at this intertwined knot when he wrote, “Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear [be recognizable as] sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become [be obvious, readily recognizable as what it is,] exceedingly sinful.” (Rom. 7:13) The tangled knot that Messiah (Christ) came to unravel and undo and dissolve is the knot of sin within the human heart. The law is neither sinful nor evil – it merely exposes sin and reveals it for what it is: a failure to attain to the moral standards and expectations of the holy, transcendent Most High God.

Why did God institute blood sacrifices, offerings and rituals and maintain them for so long? To show us Himself in a way that would show us, in contradiction to our blind arrogance and pride, just how impossible it would be for us to be like Him in any real or substantial way. In the law we are presented with pictures that show us behaviors that God both would and would not practice. The list of laws that the Israelites were not to violate by practicing some immoral act are reflective of the fact that God would not practice those immoral acts either. The list of laws that the Israelites were to routinely keep are reflective of some aspect of Himself and His plan of redemption and restoration. It may perhaps be overly simplistic to do so but there is much value in recognizing the first as the moral laws of God and the second as the ceremonial laws of God – the former have never been eradicated (as standards for the behavior patterns of God’s people) and the latter are completely fulfilled in Christ.

In these capacities, the law of Moses provides us with a “mirror” by which we can evaluate our life – someone truly led by God’s Spirit, for example, will not routinely steal, lie or covet (see Ex. 20:15-17) – and we can improve our understanding and familiarity with who and what God really is – the God of the Old Testament who “lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16) and who is “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29) is the same Father God of the New Testament. The difference is that the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross satisfies all of God’s righteous judgments against mankind and those who turn to Christ in faith need not face those judgments which remain as fierce and implacable as ever for those who are outside of Christ.

We do not need to obey the law but, as we obey the Spirit of God, we will fulfill God’s laws (in their spirit if not their actual letter). What we glean from the laws of God is simply an “outside reference” by which we can realistically gauge the status of our spiritual life in Christ. For example, the one whose life is governed by covetous desires for this world’s goods and luxuries – a condition much more rampant in the “church” than most will admit (see Ex. 20:17) – can hardly claim to be living life by Christ’s Spirit and needs to repent of his wickedness and submit once more to Christ’s Spirit and truly live in His righteousness. There is nothing more presumptuous and repugnant than for such a one to proclaim himself to be “the righteousness of God” (see 2 Cor. 5:21) when his life is filled with sinful habits and practices which, if he would but examine God’s laws more closely, he would see his sin for what it is, a slap and spit in the face of the Messiah who died for the removal of his sins. Finding some area of our life where we are in violation of God’s laws does not require us to return to the law – but it does require us to return to Christ!

There are undoubtedly more reasons why God instituted a system of blood sacrifices, offerings and rituals and kept them in place for 1,500 years. But these answers to this question –

- to point us toward Messiah who would remove sins,

- to show us the attributes and nature of God, and
- to show us the great and unsearchable depths of our own sin and depravity –

are profound enough to drive us to our knees first in repentance and second in gratitude for providing for us such a complete and eternal salvation in the sacrifice of Messiah. Then let us arise in faith in Him and seek to follow after Him wherever He leads us, thus confirming our sonship in Christ. (Rom. 8:14)

Anything else is merely a fleshly attempt to practice false religion in His name. It did not work for Cain (Gen. 4:5-8), it did not work for the people of Noah's time (Gen. 6:11-12), it did not work for the wicked kings and people of Israel and Judah, and it does not work for the people alive today – no matter what "church" (or non-"church" "church") we attend or what denomination (or "non-denominational" denomination) we align ourselves with.

The writer of Hebrews also provides us with a very simple picture:

“Ground which absorbs the rain that often falls on it and produces plants which are useful to those who cultivate it, is ground which has the blessing of God. But ground which produces nothing but thorns and thistles is of no value and is bound sooner or later too be condemned – the only thing to do is to burn it.” (Heb. 6:7-8 - Phillips' translation)

Our life is to be judged – in this life and in eternity to come – on the fruit we produce. (Mt. 7:20, Heb. 9:27, Rev. 20:12-13, etc.) We *are* the ground that often receives rain. What kind of vegetation – crops or weeds – we produce will determine the outcome of our judgment. It is not knowledge that we've acquired but results that we have produced in our own lives and in the lives of others that will matter.

We can turn to any of the multitudes of counterfeit "Christianity" varieties that abound today – intellectualism, spiritualism (hyper-charismania), legalism, lawlessness/relativism, ritualism, traditionalism, etc. – but in so doing we are only rejecting the Head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ. Only those who follow Him in spirit and in truth are those genuine followers who will one day inherit eternal promises.

We do well to consider the origin of the verses this article began with. The Psalmist David wrote:

“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; in the scroll of the Book it is written of [prescribed for] me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart.’” (Psa. 40:6-8)

The will of God is for us to live forth the divine life of Christ from the depths of our frail and fallen human nature. (2 Cor. 5:15) We do this, not by using the flesh in any manner (especially not religiously!), but from the ashes of our crucified and dead flesh arises the Spirit of Christ in its manifold and myriad manifestations. His laws are written on our hearts (Heb. 8:10) and to obey anything else but the will of God is foreign to our existence in Him. Those who rely

on teachings (“doctrines”) and “theologies” about “grace” or “liberty” in order to avoid all possible contact with the law of God are as misguided as are those who insist that every jot and tittle of the Mosaic law is to be obeyed down to the very last letter. There are no rules or laws to keep, there is a Head to be followed and obeyed. (Heb. 5:9) Anything else is merely religious flesh or demonic deception designed to destroy your soul and spirit for all of eternity.

Let he who has ears hear.

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