

V

THE LAW DOES NOT REVEAL THE NATURE OF GOD

For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law . . . (Heb. 7:12).

For I am the Lord, I change not . . . (Malachi 3:6).

The law of Moses was given at Mt. Sinai, approximately 1,500 years before Christ was born in the manger at Bethlehem. Ussher gives the date as 1491 B.C. Jesus was crucified at approximately A.D. 30. At this time there was a "change of the law." In fact Jesus took the law out of the way "nailing it to His cross" (Col. 2:14).

To us 1,500 years seems like an incredibly long time. It represents more than twenty lifetimes and perhaps the rise and fall of many nations. To God, however, it represents only a day or two. With God, a thousand years is only like a day, and vice versa. God exists in the timelessness of eternity, and from His perspective the law was only used for a very brief period. Even from the standpoint of human history as a whole, the law represents only a fraction of God's dealings with man.

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As we view the law it is important to remember that it does not reflect the nature of God, or of reality in general. The purpose of the law was not to reflect the nature of God, or reality, but to act as a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ and the reality of this strange phenomenon called "faith."

When we step back and attempt to see the law from the vantage point of God there are parts of it that appear ludicrous and almost comical. These apparent anomalies and inconsistencies disappear, however, when we view the law in relation to the PURPOSE for which it was designed by God. God is a Master Designer who does all things well, and the law was perfectly designed to fulfill its intended purpose.

When Solomon dedicated the temple he acknowledged the fact ". . . behold the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" (I Kings 8:27).

The size of our universe is more than the finite mind can comprehend. We speak of stars that are billions, or trillions of light years away, only to discover that what we once thought to be stars are actually whole galaxies of stars. Our most powerful telescopes cannot penetrate the extremities of space, and they leave us wondering how many billions of blazing suns are yet to be discovered.

Yet, for all intents and purposes, the law trained the Hebrew people to think of God in association with a little tent that they carried around in the wilderness. (See Ex. 25:8; 29:45-46; etc.)

We know that God is "omnipresent" but by law the Hebrew people could only make offerings to Him in one place. Each year, no matter how far away they lived, they were required to make the long journey to Jerusalem so that they could "worship." Even then they were not permitted to worship God directly, but were forced to depend upon a priest who was sometimes utterly unscrupulous and corrupt. I Samuel 2:22, for example, indicates that the sons of ~~Samuel~~ ^{Eli} raped the women who came to the Tabernacle to worship.

Certainly such a system does not really reflect the nature of God. If you are capable of seeing this contrast between the narrow parochialism of law and the vastness of Jehovah God, you will make a giant stride toward seeing the law in its proper perspective.

Over and over the law required the Hebrews not to show mercy (see Deut. 7:2; 7:16; 13:8; 19:13; 19:21; 25:12; etc.). This is the very nature of law, but it is not the very nature of God.

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The Scriptures abound with references to the mercy of God. For your convenience we here quote Psalm 136, but we remind you that this is just a token representation of the many Scriptures which could be used.

O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good:
for his mercy endureth for ever.

O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him that made great lights: for his mercy
endureth for ever.

The sun to rule by day: for his mercy endureth
for ever.

The moon and stars to rule by night: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

And brought out Israel from among them: for his
mercy endureth for ever:

With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm:
for his mercy endureth for ever:

To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his
mercy endureth for ever:

And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his
mercy endureth for ever:

But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his
mercy endureth for ever.

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To him which smote great kings: for his
mercy endureth for ever:

And slew famous kings: for his mercy endureth
for ever:

Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy endureth
for ever:

And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth
for ever:

And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy endureth
for ever:

Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy
endureth for ever.

Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy
endureth for ever:

And Hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy
endureth for ever.

Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy
endureth for ever.

O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy
endureth for ever.

Now if God is merciful, and He is, why did He command the Israelites to show no mercy? The situation is quite confusing until you see the reason why God gave the law. He gave the law to make us so disgusted with the whole concept of Law that we would make the leap of faith and find justification in Jesus Christ. God once gave Israel quails until they came out their nostrils and became loathsome (Nu. 11:30). I am suggesting that He also gave them so much law that it too came out of their nostrils and became loathsome. Can you see it? God is the giver of all life, but the law brings death, and the letter of the law killeth.

God is a loving Father, but the law is a merciless judge.

God is a Spirit and He wants people everywhere to worship Him everywhere. The law did not permit people to worship God everywhere, but required that they worship Him only in one place (see Deut. 12:13, etc.).

God wants "whosoever will" to come into His presence, and He promises that He will in no wise cast them out, but the law taught that only the high priest could come into His presence (Lev. 16).

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During the regime of law the Hebrews were taught that no Ammonite or Moabite could come into the congregation of God forever (Deut. 23:3). That's not the way God is at all. As a matter of fact, Jesus Himself had Moabite blood in His veins, for Ruth, His ancestress, was from Moab.

God is a God of all nations, but the law pictured Him as only the God of one nation.

The nature of God is to bring peace and brotherhood to all men, but the nature of the law was to build walls and promote segregation.

Surely you can see that the law does not reflect the nature of God.

The law taught men to retaliate,

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe . . . (Ex. 21:24-25).

In reality God does not want men to retaliate, but wants to handle the matter of retribution Himself. For "vengeance is mine, I will repay saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). He only gave the law to bring us to Jesus.

During the period of law, no man could be a priest unless he came from the tribe of Levi and unless he was a descendant of Aaron. (This made it impossible for Jesus to even be a priest according to the law for Jesus came from the tribe of Judah.) But more than that, even Aaron's sons could not become priests if they had any blemish. Some specific defects are listed in Leviticus 21:17ff. and they include the blind, the lame, flat nose, brokenfooted, brokenhanded, crooked backed, dwarf, etc. You know that's not the way God is. He just gave us these rules to bring us to Jesus.

God forbade a priest to marry an immoral woman (Lev. 21:7) but over and over God pictures Himself as the Bridegroom of an adulterous Israel. He even commanded Hosea to, "Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms . . ." (Hos. 1:2). It seems like God contradicts Himself until you see the purpose of law!

During the period of law the Hebrew men were commanded to put away their wives who were foreigners (Ezra 10:3). Some of them even had children by these wives (vs. 44). That's not the way God really is. He just wanted us to be driven in desperation to the principle of faith.

There is ever the temptation for some of us to hold up our head and throw back our shoulders and say, "God is too like that! He is a

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jealous God and a consuming fire.” This is the subtle and utterly devastating thing about law. You think you can get by. You think you are better than “sinners.” You are thankful that you go to church and pay your tithes and do all other kinds of “good” things. Then you discover that either through commission or omission, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Then you discover that whoever keeps the whole law and only offends in even one little point is guilty of it all. Then, hopefully, you will discover that God is trying to teach us a better way. Please don’t wind up worshiping the slave who was intended to be only our schoolmaster.

Death By Stoning

The most common form of capital punishment during the days of the law was by stoning. It usually took place outside of the city (Lev. 24:23; Nu. 15:35, 36; I Kings 21:13; etc.). At least two witnesses were required (Deut. 17:6). These witnesses then laid their hands upon the guilty person (Lev. 24:14). The witnesses were then required to cast the first stones (Deut. 17:7). Then the rest of the congregation was to cast stones also. Several times God specified that the stoning was to be done by:

“all the people . . .” Deut. 17:7

“all the congregation . . .” Nu. 15:35

“all Israel . . .” Josh. 7:25, etc.

It is therefore obvious that God was not merely punishing evildoers. He was teaching a lesson. If United States law required every citizen to walk by and throw the switch on the electric chair, we would be well advised to ask why. The same question needs to be asked about the law of God.

Of particular interest to me is the command in Exodus 21:28ff. to stone to death an ox which had gored someone to death. I suggest for your thinking that this is not a very easy way to kill an ox. I remember a farmer whose bull suffered a broken leg. He rushed to the butcher so that the meat could be salvaged before infection set in. The enraged animal was placed in a holding chute and shot between the eyes six times with a .22 pistol. A combination of his thick skull and violent anger left him very much alive. The butcher then went

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next door for a larger caliber weapon and subsequently dispatched the animal with no more difficulty. Can you not imagine, however, that killing such an animal with rocks might provide the participants with some moments of real excitement. The death of the ox was merely the tip of the educational iceberg. Death by stoning was also teaching Israel something very significant about the nature of law.

Stoning was commanded for a variety of offenses:

Any man or animal which touched Mt. Sinai was to be stoned (Ex. 19:13).

A man was commanded to be stoned for gathering sticks on the sabbath (Nu. 15:32-36).

A rebellious son was to be stoned (Deut. 21:18-21).

Stoning was also the penalty for adultery (Deut. 22:24); giving one's seed to Molech (Deut. 20:2); having a familiar spirit (Deut. 20:27); cursing and blaspheming God (Deut. 24:14-23). A woman who came to the marriage altar without the tokens of her virginity was to be stoned at the door of her father's house (Deut. 22:20-21) etc.

Now, for the sake of illustration, let us suppose that a young man rebels against his parents. They take him to the elders of the city and say, "This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice . . ." (Deut. 21:10). The men of the city are then to stone him with stones that he die. Can you imagine that those who filed by and cast their stones at the squirming victim may have felt a bit uneasy about the whole procedure. The more honest ones may have realized that this would have been their fate if their parents had only turned them in.

Or what about the poor woman whose tokens of virginity were absent . . . even though she was a virgin. If you are so naive as to think that there were no miscarriages of justice during the period of law I need only point you to Calvary and remind you that it was the exponents of the law who demanded the death of Jesus. Pilate couldn't understand it; but they cried out, "We have a law and by our law he ought to die . . ." (John 19:7).

The point is this. If the law had worked . . . nobody would have needed Jesus. If 1500 years of law had turned Israel into a Utopia of fraternal bliss, there would have been no need for the Kingdom of Heaven to come.

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The law instead did exactly what God intended it to do. It drove us to Jesus and to a totally different concept of justification.

Moses was kept out of Canaan by a tiny little technicality. Most of us are guilty of far more than technicalities. Yet, legalism breeds a kind of hypocrisy which causes us to pick little specks out of someone else's eyes and then be totally unaware of a giant beam in our own eye.

When God placed man upon the earth, He gave him every herb and every fruit for food. Later, after the flood, man's diet was expanded to include "every moving thing that liveth . . ." (Gen. 9:3). The law, however, began by restricting the Hebrew diet for 40 years to a substance called "manna" which came down from heaven. How much less this was than what God really wanted us to have.

God is eternal and spiritual . . . and the law was temporal and carnal. It is almost as though God went to a pendulous extreme to give us exactly the opposite of what He was really like.

He created us in His own image. He wants us to be like He is. He knew, however, that such a dream would seem like only a dream. He knew that we would be tempted to sell out our souls for a mess of pottage. He knew he would cash in our real treasures for a few tinsel trinkets which would rust and tarnish with the passing of time. Therefore, He gave us the law. He chained us like a slave to a physical system that was guaranteed to make us miserable. But remember, He had a divine purpose for doing so.

Jesus reduced the complexities of life to only two choices—"God" or "mammon." He said you cannot serve God and mammon. You must make a choice.

The word mammon is found only four times in the Scriptures. W. E. Vine says that it comes from the Hebrew word signifying to be firm, steadfast, hence that which is to be trusted.

In other words, in what do you trust? Some people trust in God for salvation, some people trust in something else, or someone else.

The law helps us to realize that we have no other choice but God. It does not represent the nature of God and was never intended to. It was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

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THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Can you discern someone's nature from their shadow (Heb. 10:1)?
2. The Scriptures teach that God does not change, can this be truly said of anyone else?
3. Did the law require mercy or not?
4. Is God merciful?
5. How would our faith be affected if Jesus had come from the tribe of Levi?
6. What do you think is the most merciful way of execution?
7. Why was it necessary to have a change of law (Heb. 7:12)?
8. Were Caiaphas and Annas representative of what kind of people the law produced?
9. Discuss the contrast between Jesus who wanted to save the thieves on either side of His cross, and the Jews who wanted to break their legs (John 19:31).
10. Was everyone who studied the law without mercy?

