

## THE CHRISTIAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 13, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The Bible is the world's most honored book. It was the first book to be printed. Since that day in the middle of the 15th century, approximately two billion additional copies have poured from the world's presses. The Bible is also the world's most carefully produced book. It is a demonstration of printing at its best, involving more careful translating, editing, typesetting and copy reading than any other book in history. It is appropriate that it should be generally printed on fine paper and bound in leather. On no other book has so much time, skill and money been expended.

Yet, it is a strange baffling book. Many people consider it beyond their ability to understand. To them it is almost incomprehensible. Some have even considered it to be like our United States Constitution, something that only the most highly trained constitutional lawyers can properly interpret. According to this view, only some specialist in religion, after a lifetime of the study of Hebrew, Greek, and theology, can properly interpret the scriptures.

In order to make this problem of understanding the Bible more real, let us imagine a typical, modern business man who sets out to read the Bible. He comes to his study with a genuine respect for the scriptures, and an earnest desire to know the truth which they contain. He begins the reading of Genesis and finds the stories both interesting and exciting. Avidly he reads the story of the creation of the universe, and the stories of individuals such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The fifty chapters of the book of Genesis go by rapidly and soon he is reading in the early chapters of Exodus.

### Problems Arise

It is here that he begins to bog down completely in his comprehension of the sacred text, particularly as it relates to his own life. After thrilling to the escape of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, he reads and ponders the Ten Commandments. But then he comes upon a passage like this, "Now this is that which thou shalt offer upon the altar: two lambs a year old day by day continuously. The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning; and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even: and with the one lamb the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour mingled with the fourth part of a hin or beaten oil; and the fourth part of a hin of wine for a drink offering. And the other lamb thou shalt offer at even, and shalt do thereto according to the meal-offering of the morning, and according to the drink-offering thereof, for a sweet savor, an offering made by fire unto Jehovah. It is a continual burnt-offering throughout your generations ..." (Ex. 29:38-42). Here he pauses in confusion to wonder just how he could perform these duties in his modern life. The Ten Commandments he can accept, but what about all of this?

As he reads on into the book of Leviticus he finds this passage, "These are the living things which ye may eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is cloven footed, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that may ye eat." The sentences that follow rule out the camel, the coney, and the hare, because though they chew the cud, they do not have cloven hooves. Then comes the sentence, "And the swine, because he parteth the hoof, and is cloven footed, but cheweth not the cud, he is unclean unto you. Of their flesh ye shall not eat, and their carcasses ye shall not touch; they are unclean unto you." (Lev. 11:2, 7-8). He pauses to consider how this religious restriction upon the eating of certain foods would eliminate the bacon, sausage, and ham which are so customarily a part of his breakfast routine.

Interwoven with these commands are also the commands concerning the building of a tabernacle. He reads that the people are to bring gold, fine linen, ram skins, and seal skins dyed red, none of which are in his range of gifts. Then there are the commands to make annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, an undertaking beyond his budget. There are also feast days to be kept in a manner completely foreign to his way of life. Surely these are for another time, yet right in the middle of these demands are the fundamental, absolutely essential, Ten Commandments. He closes the book and lays it aside in utter bewilderment.

### Three Dispensations

What our friend needs to know is that God has had three great, major dispensations of dealing with man. First, there was the Patriarchal Dispensation. This period lasted for approximately 2500 years, beginning with Adam and ending with the giving of the Mosaic Law on Mt. Sinai. During this period there was no church, no temple, and no written system of laws. God spoke directly to the heads of families in visions and dreams and through angels. This age is sometimes referred to as the period of "Starlight" to distinguish it from the two later periods, characterized by "Moonlight" and "Sunlight."

The second period was the Mosaic Dispensation. This period lasted for approximately 1500 years, beginning with Moses and ending when Christ died on the cross, and the church began. During this period there was the tabernacle or temple as the center of worship. There was also an elaborate system of laws, with the Ten Commandments as their center. To carry out the extensive system of sacrifices there was a carefully regulated priesthood. This is the period of "Moonlight."

The third period is the Christian Dispensation. It began with Christ's death and the beginning of the church, and has already lasted approximately 1900 years. It will continue in effect until Christ returns to announce the end of time and the Judgment. The temple gave way to the church in the Christian Age and, the Law of Moses was replaced by the greater law of liberty, the law of Christ. This is the period of God's full and complete revelation, the period of "Sunlight."

Sometimes when a person hears for the first time of the three dispensations, he finds it difficult to understand just how these facts relate to him. What all of this means is that people who live "this side of the cross" are under the rules and regulations of neither the Patriarchal nor the Mosaic Ages. We are under the jurisdiction of Christ.

Can we be sure that this is true? Yes, because the scriptures themselves so teach. For example, "And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: and he was transfigured before them and his face did shine as the sun, and his garments became whiter then the light. And behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with them. And Peter answered, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses and one for Elijah. While he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matt. 17:1-5). This incident plainly shows the superiority of Christ, over Moses the Old Testament law giver and over Elijah one of the chief Old Testament prophets. The voice of God declared that now men must hear Christ, the divine Son of God.

#### Old Covenant vs. New Covenant

The New Testament is the Christian's only rule of faith and practice. Many passages point up the fact that the Law of Moses has been superseded by the law of grace. Although there are certain unchanging principles that one encounters in the Old Testament, the law itself is no longer authoritative. As the apostle John said, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17).

The New Covenant, as clearly shown in passages like Hebrews 9:15-17, became effective after the death of Christ. According to the apostle Paul, "... the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith is come, we are no longer under a tutor." (Gal. 3:24-25). The word "faith" as used by Paul, refers to the entire gospel or body of truth. Someone has said, "The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, while the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed."

Just here I should like to quote the words of Thomas W. Phillips, written a generation ago, "Nowhere do we meet with such great contrasts as we do between the law and the gospel. The one was narrow, local, limited to the Jew and the land of Palestine, the other embraced all mankind. The one taught hatred to our enemies, the other love for our foes. The law treated its subjects as slaves, the gospel as free men. Peter, who had suffered the galling servitude of the former, said the law was 'a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.' (Acts 15:10). 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage' (Gal. 5:1) was the exhortation of the great apostle Paul who had been enslaved by the one and freed by the other. The first revealed God as Creator, the last as Father. The first was carnal, the last was spiritual; the first was earthly, the other heavenly."

#### What Saith The Scriptures?

Let us turn to the Bible and read concerning this matter of the old and the new covenants. The New Testament book of Hebrews has this contrast as its central theme. The book begins, "God, having of old times spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us through his Son ..." (Heb. 1:1-2). A few chapters later we read, "For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a testament is of force where there hath been death: for it doth never avail while he that made it liveth. Wherefore even the first covenant hath not been dedicated without blood, for when every commandment had been spoken by Moses unto all the people according to the law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people ... And according to the law, I may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission." (Heb. 9:16-19, 22).

A few sentences later we read, "For the law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, can never with the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect them that draw nigh. For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." Then specifically contrasting the old covenant with the new, the writer says, "He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second ... This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord: I will put my laws on their heart, and upon their mind also will I write them; then saith he, And their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." (Heb. 10:1, 4, 9, 16-17). This last is a quotation from Jeremiah, as he reported God's promise to give his people a new covenant. That new covenant we find in the New Testament.

In the book of Acts we read this corroborating statement, "Be it known unto you therefore, brethren, that through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins: and by him everyone that believeth is justified from all things, from which he could not be

justified by the law of Moses.” (Acts 13:38-39). Early in the ministry of Jesus he said, “Verily, I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law until all things be accomplished.” (Matt. 5:18).

Just when were all things fulfilled? John 19:30 gives the answer, “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, (meaning the time of his death on the cross) he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up his spirit.” We are certain that this refers not only to the finishing of his own life, but also to the finishing of his work because we read, “... having blotted out the bonds written in ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us: and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross ... Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect to a feast day or a new moon or a sabbath day: which are a shadow of the things to come ...” (Col. 2:14-15, 17). In Ephesians 2:15 we also read, “... having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances ...” When Christ died on the cross, he fulfilled the old law completely and took it out of the way. To this agrees a passage in Romans 7:6, “But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that wherein we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter.” We also remember the words of James, as he referred to this new covenant in contrast to the old, as “... the perfect law, the law of liberty ...” (James 1:25).

### What About The Ten Commandments?

Just here we can almost hear someone ask the question, “But what about the Ten Commandments? Have they also been taken away?” The answer is, “Yes, they have been taken away.” All of the Mosaic Law has been taken away, but nine of the Ten Commandments have been brought over into the New Testament era by the Lord and have been made a part of the New Covenant. The matter is quite clear if we compare the Biblical situation with the historical situation of our own United States. There was a time when this vast continent was under the dominion of the American red man. His tribal laws and customs were the laws of the land. Then, the colonizing countries of Europe reached across the Atlantic and for a time this continent was under the domination of these European powers. Its laws were made by foreign rulers. Finally, after 1776, the continent became the United States of America, with our present Constitution and its system of laws.

Some of the laws of the red man, and some of those of the colonists, have been incorporated into our present laws, but we are not under the laws of these former ages. Such is the case in regard to the three dispensations of God. Some of Moses’ Law--nine of the Ten Commandments, in a deeper and richer form are also part of the law of Christ. We obey the laws which Christ gave, rather than Moses’ Law. Only the law of the Sabbath was left behind. The Sabbath has been replaced by the first day of the week--the Lord’s Day. In place of the Sabbath God has given us a day of sweeter memories, characterized especially by the triumphant resurrection of our Savior from the dead, and the beginning of the church.

One searches in vain among Christ’s teachings and the authoritative statements of the apostles for a command for Christians to keep the Sabbath. Nowhere are those who live this side of the cross commanded to keep the seventh day of the week as a day of worship. Rather, the apostles and early Christians met “on the first day of the week to break bread.” (Acts 20:7). The Old Testament is like a calendar, to be respected and followed during the time when it is in effect, but to be laid aside when its relevancy has passed.

### Values of the Old Testament

At this point someone is likely to think that we have completely abandoned the Old Testament and discarded it as worthy of our study. Such is far from the truth. The Old Testament serves many purposes in the life of a Christian. Among these are the following: (1) The Old Testament gives us an explanation of how the universe began. (2) The Old Testament gives us an explanation of who we are. (3) The Old Testament explains the origin of sin and our need of a Savior. (4) The Old Testament gives us the historical background necessary to an understanding of the New Testament. (5) The Old Testament shows us many of the eternal principles of right living: love of God, faith, obedience, and the like. (6) The Old Testament gives us many graphic life-stories designed to warn us against evil and guide us toward good. (7) The Old Testament contains many of the most inspirational passages of the Bible, such as the 23rd Psalm and the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. (8) The Old Testament convinces us of the inspiration of the scriptures through its fulfilled prophecies. (9) The Old Testament helps us to feel the majesty and grandeur of God. And (10). The Old Testament shows us how blessed we are to live in the Christian era.

### Conclusion

Earlier, we spoke of the fact that some consider the Bible beyond their ability to comprehend, referring to it like the Constitution of the United States, something that only a specialist can interpret properly. Such is far from the truth. The New Testament scriptures emphasize the importance of the individual’s study of the inspired word. For example, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth.’ (II Tim. 2:15). He continued a few sentences later, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.” (II Tim. 3:16-17).

We also remember the words of the inspired writer Luke, as he referred to the people of Berea, “Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things

were so.” (Acts 17:11). Then, there are Paul’s words of admonition to the Philippians, “ ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ... ” (Phil. 2:12).

Let us make the Bible our guide. Let us strive to know what the Bible teaches. Then, let us do what the Bible says, for there is no reward for these who stop short of the doing. “Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only.” (James 1:22).