

Just which law has been done away?

When we discuss the Old and New Covenants in the HERALD, for the sake of understanding we usually simplify things slightly. But that's probably been a mistake, because judging from our readers' questions sometimes, we aren't getting the message across as clearly as we thought.

For example, we usually say the Levitical Ministry was part of the Old Covenant. That makes things easier to explain, but technically it isn't correct. And while it makes the explanation simpler, it also (as we have discovered) prevents a complete understanding of what God is doing.

So this time we'll lay everything out in intricate detail. And we think you'll discover some surprising things.

The complete understanding of the Covenants and God's plan comes to us mainly through the apostle Paul. The information has always been in the

Scriptures, but it hasn't always been available - because God has mostly wanted (and still wants) it hidden.

God used Paul to tie together the references scattered all through the Scriptures, and present God's plan as a complete and understandable package. Except it isn't understandable unless God wants someone to understand it. It's like one of those drawings that can be of more than one thing, depending on how we look at it - while we're concentrating on one picture the other remains invisible to us. But once we see the other picture we wonder how we didn't see it all the time because it's now so obvious.

However, although Paul tied everything together and made it understandable, God still wanted it hidden, because even now is not the time He wants everyone to understand. It won't be generally understood until after the coming captivity:

"And He said, Go, and tell this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed. Then I said, Lord, how long? And He answered: Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate," (Isaiah 6:9-11)

In the meantime God's plan for saving His human creation remains mostly a mystery, just as He wants it to be.

And one way God has ensured that what He is doing remains hidden, is by the apostle Paul's letters. Paul used many terms loosely, and unless we already know what he is talking about, we can easily misunderstand what he is saying. That's what religious people have been doing for two thousand years. That's why theologians can come to the foolish belief that the Ten Commandments are done away. That's what the apostle Peter warned everyone about:

"and account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul,

according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15-16)

In his letters Paul tells us that for Christians, there is a body of law which has passed. The confusion occurs because Paul uses the word "law" to mean different things in different letters. What we are examining in this article is mainly this law:

"What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator." (Galatians 3:19)

This law was temporary, and was meant to last only till Christ (The Seed) appeared. Paul refers to the same law in Romans and calls it the "law for righteousness":

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:4)

In Galatians he calls it a tutor which had authority only over children:

"Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." (Galatians 3:24-25)

Now, this "law for righteousness" is not the Ten Commandments - the Ten Commandments were, and are, an intrinsic part of Christianity. To find out exactly what Paul is talking about we need to have a careful look at the Old Covenant, and the way God is saving human beings.

We take up at the point where God has brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage, and taken them into the wilderness:

Because of His promise to Abraham, God was committed to using

Israel (Abraham's descendants) as the means by which He would save all human beings.

"For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

Israel was destined by God to be the example and leader of the whole world, and it was through a tribe of Israel - Judah - that God would later bring about a reconciliation between sinful man and Himself. Because without that reconciliation - the removal of sin and its penalty - the promise of eternal inheritance made to Abraham and his descendants could never come about:

"Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 28:14)

The seed referred to is of course Jesus Christ - through Christ's death all the families of the earth (Gentile as well as Israelite) are blessed [saved]. But notice it says that the families of the earth will be blessed in Israel as well as in Christ. That is, Christ's death makes it all possible, but it is through Israel that God is saving the world.

So, not too long after He had led them into the desert, God took another major step in His plan - He formalised with Israel the agreement He had made with Abraham:

"The covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting Covenant.

(Psalm 105:9-10)

Firstly, while they were still in Egypt God told the Israelites what He was going to do for them:

"Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the Lord." (Exodus 6:6-8)

Then, at Horeb He laid before them the conditions of the agreement He wanted to make with them:

"And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." (Exodus 19:3-6)

We'll examine it more closely later, but this was the making of what we call the Old Covenant.

Now, this agreement - the Old Covenant - was not about whether or not Israel, and mankind in general, would receive the promise of eternal inheritance made to Abraham. That was already sure because God had promised it. The promise would become available when Christ (Abraham's Seed) came to earth to remove the death penalty to which sin had consigned all human beings:

"that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:14)

The agreement at Horeb (Sinai) was about whether or not Israel would

be the kingdom of priests which would lead the nations to God. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit Palestine, and that salvation would come through them. But God wanted to go further and give Israel even more - He wanted them to be the instruments of salvation. That is, He wanted Israel to be the connection between Himself and humanity.

So, in good faith, God made the agreement - the Old Covenant - with Israel. God's side of the agreement was that He would make them His special people, with all that that meant. Israel's side of the agreement was that they would obey the laws and statutes which God gave them.

Before the agreement was made, God explained to the Israelites, through Moses, all the laws and obligations which were their side of the Covenant. The people agreed, so Moses went to God and said they wanted to go ahead and make the agreement:

"So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do. So Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord." (Exodus 19:7-8)

So now both parties - God and Israel - were ready to make the Covenant. God told them to get ready for the ceremony which would be held in three days time:

"Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder

and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up." (Exodus 19:16-20)

"And God spoke all these words, saying..." (Exodus 20:1)

What followed then was a statement of the complete law, the keeping of which was Israel's side of the Covenant:

After the people heard everything, they once again said they would keep such an agreement, so with the blood of animals the Old Covenant came into force:

"So Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, All the words which the Lord has said we will do. And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words." (Exodus 24:3-8)

Now, once the Covenant was made, it could not be changed:

"Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it." (Galatians 3:15)

So to find out exactly what the Old Covenant consisted of, we merely have to read Exodus Chapters twenty to twenty three. If something isn't listed there, it can't be a part of the Old Covenant.

Because after it was confirmed by the blood of the sacrifices, it was final and unchangeable.

As we said at the beginning, in the HERALD we usually say that the Levitical Ministry was a part of the Covenant, but technically it wasn't - there is not one word in the Covenant about a Levitical priesthood. And notice that the sacrifices from which the blood came to inaugurate the Covenant were offered not by special Levitical priests but by "young men of the children of Israel."

The Levitical Priesthood, with all its ordinances and sacrifices, was added to the Covenant. It could never be an actual part of the Covenant, because it wasn't written into the agreement, but it stood next to the Covenant. But that isn't the way God originally wanted it. When God made the Old Covenant with them He simply wanted them to obey Him:

"For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices. But this is what I commanded them, saying, Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you." (Jeremiah 7:22-23)

But Moses had not even delivered the written document which detailed the Covenant the Israelites had just made, before they had abandoned God and took hold of paganism with both hands:

"Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And Aaron said to them, Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me. So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, This is your

god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt! So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord. Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. And the Lord said to Moses, Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves." They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:1-8)

And by their actions, they sentenced themselves to death by one of the provisions of the Covenant they had only just made:

"He who sacrifices to any god, except to the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed." (Exodus 22:20)

Now, at a point in the future, Jesus Christ would come to remove that death penalty. But in the meantime, since disobedience and sin was obviously going to be a part of their lives, something had to be done. So God added the Levitical Ministry to the life of Israel.

The purpose of the Levitical Ministry was to bridge the gap between God and His people which their sin had created. But in actual fact the activities of the Levitical Ministry did not really remove sin. What they did was act out, as a forerunner, the real forgiveness which would come only when Christ allowed His blood to be spilt.

The Levitical Ministry used the blood of bulls and goats as a substitute - but an ineffective substitute - till the blood of Christ came and really did forgive sin.

This is an extremely important point. There was nothing symbolic about Christ's death. It didn't symbolise something else. It had to happen - His blood had to be spilt - before there was any forgiveness of sin. Without His

death, we would have to die. The death of an animal can not take away the death penalty from a human being. All the blood of an animal can do is act as a symbol of Christ's blood which is the only blood that can ever take away a human death penalty:

"It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (Hebrews 9:9)

"For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins." (Hebrews 10:4)

"And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." (Hebrews 10:11)

The way it worked was that God chose to overlook their sin if they applied the instructions given to the Levitical Ministry. The sins were not forgiven, they were merely covered and taken out of sight. Of course, from the point of view of the Israelites, and the functioning of their society, there was forgiveness. But true forgiveness wasn't possible till Christ came and faith entered the equation. And while mostly God did accept the "righteousness" which was conferred on people by the Levitical Ministry and its sacrifices for sin, He did not always do so. Which shows that the sacrifices under the Old Covenant Ministry were not effective in themselves, they were just acting out a shadow:

"And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." (1 Samuel 3:14)

So the Levitical Ministry acted out for the people a shadow of the righteousness which would come with Christ's death. But the Israelites did not understand that what they had was only a shadow, and a temporary, ineffective method of attaining righteousness. Something which would last only until Christ came and brought true righteousness.

And the reason the Israelites did not understand was that God did not want them to understand. Because when Israel

turned from God to paganism, God, in turn, spurned them and put Gentiles ahead of them as those who would be Priests to Him in bringing people to salvation:

"They have provoked Me to jealousy by what is not God; they have moved Me to anger by their foolish idols. But I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I will move them to anger by a foolish nation." (Deuteronomy 32:21)

To prevent them understanding and turning back to Him before the Gentiles had had an opportunity, God blinded the Israelites to true righteousness, and left them with their ineffective "law for righteousness":

"But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them." (John 12:37-40)

So the Israelites believed that their Levitical Ministry was effective for salvation, and did not understand that it was temporary and its glory was fading. But we must not think that because it was only temporary, the Levitical Ministry was bad in any way. It came from God and was meant to illustrate the glory that was coming in the future, so it itself therefore had a measure of glory:

"But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech— unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." (1 Corinthians 3:7-16)

This passage is a classic example of the way God keeps the truth hidden, and needs some explanation. When Moses went up the mountain, God gave him the two stone tablets on which were written not only the words of the Covenant, but the details of the Tabernacle and sacrifices. That is, the tablets of stone also had the instructions for the Levitical Ministry written on them. That is what is meant by the first sentence of the passage above. And it is called the ministry of death because it had no power to give life - it was only a substitute and a shadow of the ministry (Christ's) which could give life. But it was still a glorious ministry, because it came from God.

However it was, as we have seen, only a temporary ministry. So the glory reflected in Moses' face did not last. It faded away after a time, and Moses' face returned to normal. But in order to keep that fact from the Israelites, Moses put on a veil after he had finished speaking with them:

"And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face." (Exodus 34:33)

The Israelites were not permitted to know that the glory of the Old Covenant ministry was temporary and would fade, just as Moses' face stopped glowing after a time.

Now, back to that statement of Paul's about the law which was added:

"What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come

to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator." (Galatians 3:19)

The law he is talking about is the law which was added to compensate for the transgressions. That is, the Levitical Ministry, which was to act out the forgiveness of those transgressions until true forgiveness came in Christ. He was talking about the law for righteousness which Israel, in its ignorance, believed was effective for salvation.

But that law was to last only until the New Covenant came into force, because the New Covenant brought real righteousness (through Christ), and God's Holy Spirit. And righteousness comes not by performing anything or doing anything, as under the Old Covenant Ministry, but by faith - simply believing what God said about Jesus being raised from the dead, and therefore being the Captain of our salvation:

"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." (Galatians 3:23-25)

That is, we are no longer under the Levitical Ministry and its ordinances, which in any case were not effective for salvation, but merely acted out real forgiveness and salvation.

But now we need to examine some things that were part of that law which was added.

Not surprisingly, Law for the New Covenant is almost the same as Law for the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant Law is found, as we said, in Exodus Chapters twenty to twenty three. New Covenant Law is found in Deuteronomy. What makes the Old Covenant law seem so different from the New Covenant law is that people confuse the Levitical Ministry - the law for righteousness - with Old Covenant Law. (And we admit that our loose terminology in the past has added to this confusion.)

For example, the Feast Days under the Old Covenant were these:

"Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labours which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labours from the field." (Exodus 23:14-16)

And the Feasts Days under the New Covenant are these:

"Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed." (Deuteronomy 16:16)

Both the Old and the New Covenant omit two Holy Days - Trumpets and Atonement. Why? Because they were part of the law for righteousness, added to the Old Covenant but meant to last only till Christ came. Trumpets disappeared because it was the memorial of the making of the Old Covenant, and since the Old Covenant has passed for Christians, so has Trumpets. Atonement was the yearly shadow, acting out the forgiveness of sin by the sacrifice of Christ, and since Christ has come and fulfilled the reality of forgiveness, the day of Atonement has passed into history.

But for many people this creates a problem. They have been taught to observe the Days of Trumpets and Atonement and it is very difficult for them to change, and accept what the Scriptures so beautifully and so simply tell us. Oftentimes they adopt the attitude that it's better to keep them, just in case.

Unfortunately, in this case keeping law can damage us. As Paul told the Galatians, if we adopt or hold on to the points of the "law for righteousness" we thereby let go of Christ:

"Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Galatians 5:2-4)

Usually today people don't advocate that Christians be circumcised (although some do say that), but they adopt the very point of the "law for righteousness" - the day of Atonement - which has always been the major stumbling block in the way of true Christianity.

If we believe that we must keep the Day of Atonement, then we are saying that if we don't keep it we can't be saved. Which is another way of saying we are justified by keeping the "law for righteousness". As Paul said, we attempt to be justified by law, and thereby fall from grace.

We should digress here for a moment and look at a Scripture which is sometimes claimed proves we should observe Atonement:

"Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over..." (Acts 27:9)

Luke was undoubtedly referring to the Day of Atonement. (The Day of Atonement is a day of fasting). But he pointed to the day merely as a time reference. The Day of Atonement falls at the time of year when Summer has gone and the storms of Winter are imminent. So it was a convenient day for marking the point after which sailing became more risky. Much the same way as we would today refer to some public holiday that everyone knew. The Scripture cannot be used to "prove" Atonement was being kept by the early Christians.

We have seen that for Christians some law has passed. But what about the Law still remaining - the Law which is part of the New Covenant? How does that fit in to the scheme of salvation?

Salvation comes by faith, and we don't have to do anything to earn it. It's a gift. But some people extrapolate that into a nonsensical belief that keeping any law is an attempt to earn salvation for ourselves.

True, keeping law can't save us, but deliberately not keeping it can condemn us. Because by deliberately not keeping God's Law - any of God's Law - we trample on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus willingly died to save us from the penalty of sin - death. If, after being ransomed by Christ we then deliberately sin, we throw His sacrifice back in the face of both Him and God the Father.

But if our efforts and intentions are towards becoming what God wants us to be, then the sins we commit out of weakness are not imputed to us. If, as Paul puts it, we are walking in the Spirit, then there is no death penalty for sins of weakness:

"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8:1-2)

So a true Christian has freedom. Freedom from the obsolete "law for righteousness", and freedom from the worry that unless we get everything absolutely perfect in our lives, we can't be saved. If we're true Christians we're *already* saved. All we have to do is make sure we don't lose that salvation - either by deliberately throwing it away, or simply by neglecting it.#

