

Questions & Answers about God's Law
Responses to a Brother in Christ, 2006
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You have asked me three questions about God's law, a major theme in the Bible. I trust you ask sincerely because you love all of God's Word and want your mind and life to be conformed to God's ways. His law has an important function in this process. No doubt you are aware, however, that some "want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. We know that the law is good if one uses it properly" (1 Tim. 1:7–8). Your questions, with my answers, are listed below after the definitions. I will quote from the NIV, changing "Christ" to "Messiah," as authorized by John 1:41. I also plan to post this answer on my website (www.kingdombible.com).

Definitions. *Law* has various meanings in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is a common translation for Hebrew *torah*, which basically means teaching or instruction. *Torah* can refer to teaching in general (Prov. 3:1f), to a particular injunction or set of regulations (Exod. 12:49), or even to one or more of the five "books of Moses" (Neh. 8:8). "Book of the law" is a common name for Deuteronomy or the Pentateuch (Deut. 28:61; 19:21; et al.). The first part of the Hebrew Old Testament is still called *Torah* ("Law," Genesis through Deuteronomy). The other two parts are "Prophets" (*Neviim*, Joshua through Kings) and "Writings" (*Kethuviim*, the rest of the books). In fact, Jews sometimes refer to the whole collection as "the Law" or "the Law and the Prophets." The former term is illustrated in John 10:34, which quotes from the Psalms rather than the Pentateuch. The latter term is illustrated in Matthew 5:17 and 7:12.

In the New Testament the Greek word is *nomos*, which, like *torah*, also has several meanings. As just pointed out, John 10:34; Matthew 5:17; 7:12 are some examples that do not refer specifically to legislation but to all the Old Testament. *Nomos* can also refer to a single law (Heb. 7:16) or to a controlling principle (Rom. 7:21, 23, 25).

Here, however, I will address a different meaning for *law*, the one I suppose you have in mind. In practical terms it is the name for the Lord God's covenant with the nation of Israel. In this sense the terms *law* and *covenant* look at the same thing from two angles (Psa. 78:10). Exodus narrates how the Lord made this law/covenant at Mount Sinai (Deut. 5:2–4) and had Israel ratify it with the blood of animals (Exod. 24:3–8). When ratified, it constituted Israel as God's kingdom on earth (Exod. 19:3–6; Psa. 114:1–2). Though it has lessons for everyone, God never gave this law to anyone but Israel.

The term *law* was often used for the set of Ten Commandments that epitomized the whole covenant.¹ These were the "words" the Lord spoke from the mountain and Himself wrote on tablets of stone. He commanded Israel to store these tablets in the ark, which was His throne over His kingdom on earth (Exod. 25:21–22). They represented the essence of His law, which in its

¹ Calling the Ten Commandments "the law," as though that part were the whole covenant, is an example of synecdoche. So is its use to designate the whole body of Old Testament Scripture.

entirety was also stored beside the ark (Deut. 31:26). The Ten Commandments concerned mostly moral aspects; but the law as a whole included other aspects, such as, ceremonial (the priesthood and sacrifices).

1. When did the law pass away? Inasmuch as it represented the Lord's character and requirements, the law in itself was perfect. But it was never designed to last forever. It was designed to point to a better covenant, which has now been inaugurated. There are many evidences for this change. I will give some examples from the New Testament, sometimes bolding relevant expressions.

- **Second Corinthians 3** discusses the change of covenants from the standpoint of ministry. It calls the law "the old covenant" (v. 14), a source of "death" (v. 7) "that condemns men" (v. 9). It had glory, but that glory was fading even in Moses' day (vv. 7–11). In this chapter Paul does not refer merely to the ceremonial aspects of the law but specifically to what was "written on tablets of stone" (v. 3). That clearly means the Ten Commandments. Notice how Paul contrasts the old covenant to the new covenant of which he is a minister: "If what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" (v. 11). In other words, the new covenant is eternal. In it God's Spirit writes "on tablets of human hearts" (v. 3). In that way every true believer is "being transformed into [the Lord's] likeness" (v. 18).
- **Galatians 3:1 to 4:7** explains how the law is related to the promise to Abraham, which in many ways is the backbone of the Bible. "The law" in this passage is clearly the one given at Sinai—not part of the promise but "introduced 430 years later" (3:17a). It was limited in power, duration, and purpose. (a) In power the law could not bring the promise but only a curse (3:10), because no one could keep it perfectly. Yet, it could not "set aside the covenant ...and thus do away with the promise" (3:17b). (b) In duration the law was temporary. "It was added...until [Abraham's] Seed to whom the promise referred had come" (3:19). That Seed is both Messiah (3:16) and we who are in Him (3:26–29). We will inherit the blessings promised to Abraham by becoming part of Messiah's body through the gospel.

(c) In purpose the law kept the future heirs protected until "faith came" (3:23). "We were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed....Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (3:23, 25). Law was like the *paidagogos* (tutor, 3:24, NASB) or "guardians and trustees" (4:2) in charge of little children until the time when they can "receive the full rights of sons" (4:5). That time has now "fully come...to redeem those under law" (4:4–5). "So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (4:7).
- **The Book of Romans** says a great deal about the law. Here are some examples. Though the law speaks directly only "to those who are under the law," its effect is to condemn the whole world (3:19–20). In contrast, the gospel reveals God's righteousness "apart from law" (3:21) so that believers are "justified freely" (3:24). It results in the "righteous requirements of the law" being fulfilled in us through the Spirit (8:1–4). This happens because all believers

“have died to the law through the body of Messiah, that [they] might belong to another...in order that [they] might bear fruit to God” (7:1–6; cf. Gal. 2:19–21).

- **The Book of Hebrews** also speaks in detail about the old law and the new. Here are some excerpts quoted from chapters 7–10.

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it **the law was given** to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, **there must also be a change of the law.** (7:11–12)

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for **the law made nothing perfect**), and **a better hope is introduced**, by which we draw near to God. (7:18–19)

But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as **the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one**, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with **that first covenant**, no place would have been sought for **another**. But God...said...“I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts...” (8:6–10)

For this reason Messiah is the mediator of a **new covenant**, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom **to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.** (9:15)

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason **it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect** those who draw near to worship. (10:1)

But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because **by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever** those who are being made holy. (10:13–14)

These and other passages make it clear that the new law/covenant has replaced the old law/covenant. When? At the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus had already laid the foundation for the new law in His teachings, such as, the Sermon on the Mount. But the new law could not be activated until His death permitted the forgiveness of our sins. Exalted to God's right hand, the Messiah poured out the promised heavenly gift, the Spirit in whom Messiah baptizes us into His own “body”—see Acts 1:5; 2:32–33; 1 Corinthians 12:12–13. Every believer receives this divine Spirit, who proceeds to transform us, writing God's laws on our hearts and minds. Although we are not under the old law, essentially the same holiness is being written into us.

Jesus strongly affirmed the righteousness taught in “the Law and the Prophets” (Old Testament Scriptures). Every “smallest letter...least stroke of a pen” has to be accomplished (Matt. 5:18). “Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (5:19; cf. 7:24–27). Did He thereby base salvation on our obedience to the law? Of course not. But without being under the law, every believer cares about its standards and finds himself obeying. “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (1 John 2:3).

2. Is the law for believers today—or unbelievers? Part of the answer should already be obvious. Consider believers first. We are “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14), so the law is not for us directly.² This does not mean, however, that we have no law at all (1 Cor. 9:20–21), for “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Instead of being lawless, we have found the “perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25, from John 8:32). That is another name for the new law/covenant often referred to in the answer to question 1. As we behold “the Lord’s glory” in the law—or any other part of Scripture—we “are being transformed into his likeness” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Consider unbelievers. They are not under the law either, since it was given only to Israel. But they need to hear the law so as to “become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:19–20; cf. 1 Tim. 1:9–11). God can use it to shut their mouths in conviction and force them to the Savior.

3. Should God’s criminal law be enforced today? Since divine standards of justice do not change, God’s legal principles for Israel should help us too. In fact, His law has informed much law in the Western world for centuries, although we have drifted away.³ However, there is a major caveat, with many implications, as we apply that law: Neither we nor any other country is God’s kingdom as Israel was. We can apply the same principles only as circumstances warrant.

² Yet, sad to say, some teachers try to keep believers under the old law. For example, they oblige them to tithe or observe Sunday as legal requirements.

³ Consider our prison system, which has largely taken the place of more immediate, public, and useful punishment under the law. Also, the common refusal to administer capital punishment scorns both the law and God’s covenant with all mankind after the flood.