

## LESSON FOUR

### GRACE AND THE LAW

#### INTRODUCTION

Some people believe that the way of salvation in the Old Testament is completely different from that in the New Testament. They say that people in the New Testament were saved by grace while people in the Old Testament were saved by keeping God's laws. However, a careful study of the Old Testament clearly demonstrates that people have always been saved by God's **grace** and **by grace alone**.

It is true, however, that God's people in the Old Testament were given hundreds of commands to obey and obligations to fulfill. They had regulations which covered virtually every area of their personal lives and also laws governing their public or civil life. In addition, the requirements for worship and sacrifice were spelled out in great detail with feasts to observe, sacrifices to offer, duties to perform, and tithes to present. And to make matters even more challenging, in the period after the Old Testament was written, a group of religious leaders added many laws of their own to those in the Bible. For many of the Jews the laws seemed not only endless but also burdensome (Acts 15:10). How could it be that the Lord of grace could give his people so many laws—laws which seemed in some ways to be almost as burdensome as the slavery the Israelites had experienced for hundreds of years?

God did have a divine purpose for giving these laws, but it definitely was not to provide a “new” way of salvation. After giving His people one blessing after another by His **grace**, He did not suddenly decide that they would have to start “earning” their salvation in the future. He knew very well that the people could never merit salvation on their own or “do enough” to earn eternal life. And the people themselves should certainly have realized that, too. Their record of trust and obedience during the first weeks after they left Egypt was terrible. But for some reason they didn't fully understand their weaknesses or the depths of their failures. So when they first heard the words God gave Moses to pass on to them, they responded with confidence and enthusiasm: “We will do everything the Lord has said” (Exodus 19:8).

Their response may have been serious, but it was also totally unrealistic. The people obviously did not understand the holiness of God or their own spiritual limitations. They had so much to learn. And God was getting ready to teach them!

#### THE GIVING OF THE LAW

After living in idolatrous Egypt for many years, the people of Israel had very little awareness of the absolute holiness of God. They grumbled against Him, made demands on Him, and kept on asking Him for one blessing or another—almost as if He was their servant! They had very little awareness of their own sinfulness and did not even begin to understand the great distance between God's infinite perfections and their own unholiness.

So God told Moses to tell the people to prepare for their “meeting” with God on the third day. They were to consecrate themselves for the next two days, wash their clothes, and abstain from sexual relations (Exodus 19:10-11, 14- 15). They were also to keep away from the mountain where God would come near to them, not even touching it. Those who did touch the mountain would be put to death (Exodus 19: 12-13).

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him” (Exodus 19:16-19).

“When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die’” (Exodus 20:18-19).

This was probably the first time that the people became aware of the holiness and majesty of their God. They had often seen His power through the miracles He performed, but they were not fully aware of His supreme holiness. They did not fully understand the reality or the seriousness of their sin or realize how their lives were frequently out of harmony with God's will for them.

**THE FIRST REASON**, then, why God gave His laws and commandments to the people was to help them understand His majestic holiness and their own dreadful sinfulness. Most of the people seemed to be living in spiritual ignorance. They did not have a Bible to read as we do and there had not been a prophet or spiritual teacher among them for many years. The gods of the Egyptians had not helped them understand anything about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many of the people had apparently adjusted themselves to the way of living of the people around them. There were still many God-fearing people (such as Moses' family) who still served the Lord, but they had no divine law, no central place of worship, no sacrificial system, and little knowledge of the things that God taught them later in the wilderness. If God did not give them His laws, they would never know how often they failed to live the way God wanted them to live. As a result, they would never realize or understand their need for repentance and forgiveness. And neither would they understand the riches of God's **grace** that continued to surround them and bless them.

After Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, their hearts and the hearts of all their descendants were inclined to sin rather than to holiness (Ephesians 2:1-3). They did not understand that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9). They had never been taught that, in God's sight, “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 53:3). And they were not fully aware, as Jesus taught, that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”

-3-

(Matthew 15:19). Most of the people did not understand or realize that man, left to himself,

is inclined toward selfishness, pride, jealousy, envy, and greed and many other forms of evil.

The people of Israel had often been sinning against God during their first few months in the wilderness through their grumbling, disobedience and unbelief, but they were sadly unaware of it. As the apostle Paul wrote centuries later in his letter to the church in Rome, “No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). And a few chapters later he wrote, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (Romans 7:7). So, when the people of Israel heard the Lord speaking to them from the mountain in a loud voice, they trembled with fear (Exodus 20:18-19). God was far more holy and they were far more sinful than they had ever imagined or understood!

**THE SECOND REASON** why God gave the laws and commandments was to keep His people from sinning against Him. The people not only had to understand their sinful condition but they also needed guidelines and laws to help them stay away from doing what displeased the Lord.

When the people trembled with fear after hearing the voice of God, Moses said, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20).

Up to this point the Israelites did not really know how God wanted them to live. They had been taking God's **grace** largely for granted and offered Him little love or obedience in return. But now God revealed to them what it meant to be His chosen people, His treasured possession. God had graciously taken the first step in bringing them to Himself. However, if they were to continue to receive His blessings, they had to know how God wanted them to live. By keeping God's commandments, they would not be earning their salvation, but they would be living out in daily life the freedom God had graciously given them. The laws and commands would help them demonstrate their love for God and show that they truly wanted to do what most pleased and honored Him.

It's important to remember that before God gave the Israelites any of His laws, He gave them the wonderful words of Exodus 19:4: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.” Also, before giving them the the Ten Commandments God reminded them first of all that He was the God who had already delivered them from the bondage and slavery of Egypt (Exodus 20:2). The laws were not given as a way of salvation or deliverance, but they taught the people how they could walk in joy and peace and thankfulness with the God who had chosen them, delivered them, and blessed them.

If they continued to walk in faith and obedience, they would continue to receive God's gracious blessings (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 6:1-3; Deuteronomy 28:1-14). If they did not trust and obey, they would forfeit many of the blessings God had promised them and

-4-

would suffer punishment and distress instead (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). However, even when they forfeited God's blessings through disobedience and unbelief, God continued to recognize them as His treasured possession.

One of the most impressive passages in the Old Testament concerning these truths is found in Exodus 34:6-7 where we read these words which God Himself proclaimed to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished. . . .”

**A THIRD REASON** for giving the law was to help people live in positive and constructive relationships with one another. After the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, man's natural tendency and inclination was to live for self rather than for God and to serve themselves rather than to serve others in His name. God's laws would therefore help them understand what it meant to love their neighbors rather than always seeking to satisfy their own selfish wants and desire—often at the expense of others.

Though the laws given in Exodus and Leviticus might seem at first to be unnecessarily detailed, God wanted His people to know that they were to live for Him all the time and in every situation. He therefore gave them laws regarding work, health, hygiene, marriage, sexual relationships, servants, clothing, finances, business, property, civil life, legal matters, and every other aspect of their lives. The laws also taught them about justice, integrity, honesty, sincerity, compassion and every other virtue that pleases God. All the laws and commandments provided a more detailed and explicit description of what it meant to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). God wanted to impress on their minds and hearts that there was no time, no place, and no situation where they were free to live their own way rather than His way!

**A FOURTH REASON** for giving the laws was to emphasize how much the people needed a perfect Savior to fulfill God's laws in their behalf and also to pay the penalty for their own failure to obey them. No one could ever keep the laws and commandments perfectly. There were always failures of action or of motive of one kind or another as man's sinful nature led him again and again to live in ways that did not please the Lord.

It's very important, therefore, to remember that the laws showed the people what God desired from them, but the laws themselves did not give people the power to obey Him! Without the **gracious** work of God in their hearts, the people would continually fail to obey those laws and fall into sin. Over and over again they would need to be cleansed, purified and forgiven. And forgiveness and cleansing would never be obtained by human effort but only by God's mercy and **grace**. (Read Psalm 51:1-3, 7, 9-10.)

Many of the laws God gave through Moses therefore involved the worship life of the people. God gave the people detailed laws concerning sacrifices and offerings of various

-5-

kinds and appointed priests who would offer sacrifices in their behalf. These laws, too, were numerous and detailed. The rituals that were to be followed for cleansing and purification were carefully spelled out and the animals that were to be offered as sacrifices had to be the very best the people could find. Even the place where the sacrifices were to be offered (the Tabernacle) was to be built exactly as God had commanded (Exodus 25:40, 26:30).

Whether or not the people were fully aware of the significance of all of these things, they all pointed forward to the coming of the perfect Lamb of God who would some day come into this world to give His own life for the sins of the world (John 1:29; John 3:16).

**A FIFTH REASON** for giving the law was to help God's people live in a way that was pleasing to Him so that they could give a strong and consistent testimony to the nations around them. Other nations did not have God's law or understand His decrees (Psalm 147:19-20). They continued to live in spiritual ignorance. By living in obedience to God, the people would not only receive God's continued blessing but they would also bring honor and glory to the Lord in the sight of the nations.

**A SIXTH REASON** for giving the law was to provide the Israelites a way to receive God's special blessings in their lives. *(All of Lesson Six is devoted to a presentation of the blessings God's people would receive if they faithfully obeyed God's laws.)*

### **The Breaking of the Law**

After God spoke the Ten Commandments in the hearing of the people, the people remained at a distance “while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21). God proceeded to give Moses additional laws of various kinds to govern the lives of His people. The very first thing the Lord emphasized was the extreme importance of the first two of the Ten Commandments. He remembered that the Israelites had lived for four hundred years among the idolatrous Egyptians and He knew that in the years ahead the Israelites would frequently encounter people who made idols for themselves to worship. So He warned them with these words:

“You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven. Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold” (Exodus 20:22-23 ).

Later, when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God written on tablets of stone, the cloud covered the mountain and “the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. . . . To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain” (Exodus 24:15-17).

Moses stayed on the mountain with the Lord for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24:18). During this time the people became impatient as they waited for Moses to return. When he didn't return soon enough, the people gathered around Aaron, the spiritual leader of the people when Moses was not present. They said, “Come, make us gods who will go before

-6-

us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him”(Exodus 32:1).

Aaron listened to them and did what they asked! He took the gold donated by the people

(gold which had been given to them by the Egyptians) and “made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt’” (Exodus 32: 2-4.)

Incredible! How could the Israelites do such a thing? It was only a few weeks before that they had trembled with fear when they heard the voice of God. And how could they ask Aaron to make a golden calf to represent their God whose shining glory they had recently seen burning like a fire on the top of the mountain? And how could Aaron possibly agree to do it? And to top it all off, how could they possibly talk about “gods” after all that their God had said to them and done for them?

This terrible act of disobedience made it as clear as anything could that the people still did not understand the holiness and awesomeness of their God. They had witnessed His power, seen His miracles, enjoyed His provision, and received His clear instructions on how they should live, but they still understood so very little about the majesty and holiness of the gracious God who had delivered them from slavery and guided them in the wilderness.

God severely punished the people for what they had done and even threatened to destroy them and make Moses into a great nation in their place (Exodus 32:9-10). But Moses pleaded with God to show mercy and grace to the people for the sake of His own honor and glory (Exodus 32:11-12). He also appealed for mercy on the basis of the promises which the Lord had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hundreds of years before (Exodus 32: 13). In no way did he ask for mercy on the basis of anything that the people had earned or deserved or on the basis of what they might do in the future. His was simply a plea for God's **GRACE**.

God heard Moses' plea and **graciously** granted what he had asked for (Exodus 32:14).

How obvious it was that the people would never be able to earn or merit salvation by keeping God's laws. The law **revealed** their sin but it did not provide a **remedy** for it! If they were not saved by God's grace, they would never be saved at all.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

The people of Israel, chosen by God's grace to be His own treasured possession, were the most blessed people on the face of the earth. To them God showed Himself as the one only true God, a God who is powerful, loving, compassionate and gracious. After He delivered His people from bondage and slavery in Egypt, He gave them His laws and commandments to teach them how He wanted them to live in gratitude and obedience. If they obeyed His commands, they would continue to receive the abundant blessings He promised them. If they disobeyed or no longer trusted, honored, and served Him, they would suffer punishment and

-7-

lose the promised blessings. Always, however, God's promises and grace preceded the giving of His laws and commands.

The laws were never intended to establish a saving relationship between God and His people but rather to demonstrate that relationship. The laws would guide them as they sought to live lives that pleased and honored God and which also served as a witness to the nations around

them. But the laws themselves could not provide what the laws demanded.

And, since the people were totally unable to obey all the laws and commands which God had given them, the commands showed them that they needed Someone to observe God's law in their behalf and to make atonement for their own failures and sins. Many of the laws and commands in the Old Testament, therefore, pointed forward to Jesus Christ, the Redeemer who was promised already in Genesis 3:15.

Throughout the Old Testament God repeatedly provided forgiveness and grace for those who repented and confessed their sins. But the salvation was granted not on the basis of what the people did or would do. Rather salvation was based on the future work of Jesus who paid the penalty for their sins and earned eternal life for all those who put their faith and trust in Him.

**Salvation was always and only by God's grace.**

### **QUESTIONS FOR LESSON FOUR**

1. Which of the following statements is correct? Choose A or B or C.
  - A. Salvation from sin has always been a gift of God's grace.
  - B. In the New Testament salvation was a gift of grace while in the Old Testament salvation was gained primarily by obedience and good works.
  - C. In the Old Testament salvation was gained by grace plus obedience and good works.
  
2. Indicate whether the following statements are True or False.
  - A. "The Israelites were always fully aware of their sinfulness even before God gave them His laws at Mt. Sinai."
  - B. "The Israelites in Egypt had a clear understanding of God's will for their lives, but they had no opportunity to do what God wanted them to do."
  - C. "When the Israelites first came to Mt. Sinai, they were confident that they could and would do everything the Lord commanded."
  
3. According to Acts 15:10, how did some of the Jews feel about God's laws?
  
4. A. When Moses told the people at Mt. Sinai to prepare to "meet with God," what did they have to do to prepare for this meeting? (Exodus 19:10-15)  
B. Why do you think this preparation was necessary or important?
  
5. A. What did the people say when they saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet blast and saw Mt. Sinai in smoke? (Exodus 20:18-19)  
-8-  
B. Why do you think they were so afraid?
  
6. According to the Lesson notes, what was the first reason why God gave His laws and commandments to His people?
  
7. What do the following passages teach us about man's inherent sinfulness?
  - A. Ephesians 2:1-3

- B. Psalm 53:3
- C. Jeremiah 17:9
- D. Matthew 15:19

8. A. What does the apostle Paul teach in Romans 3:20?
- B. What does Paul teach in Romans 7:7?
9. A. What is a SECOND REASON why God gave the people His laws and commandments?
- B. Write out the Scripture verse which teaches us this truth.
10. Which of the following statements is correct? Choose A or B.
- A. By giving the Israelites His laws and commands, God provided the people with a new way of salvation—if they chose to follow it.
- B. God's laws and commandments provided the people a way to demonstrate their love for God and their desire to please, honor, and serve Him.
11. A. List (but do not write out) three passages that teach that God would continue to bless His people if they loved, served, and honored Him.
- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- B. List (but do not write out) two passages that indicate God would punish His people if they failed to love, serve, and honor Him.
- 1.
  - 2.
- C. In Deuteronomy 28, which is longer: the list of blessings on those who obey God or the list of punishments on those who disobey Him?
- D. Why do you think the one list is so much longer than the other?
12. Write out Exodus 34:6-7.
13. A. What is the THIRD REASON for giving the law (according to the Lesson notes)?
- B. Where in the Bible do we read that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?
- C. Where in the Bible do we read that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves?
14. A. According to the Lesson notes, what is the FOURTH REASON for giving the law?



- B. What does the apostle Paul teach us in Galatians 3:24?
15. Read Psalm 51:1-10, a psalm of David. What does this passage teach us about the basis or grounds for the forgiveness of sins?
16. A. What do Exodus 12:5 and Leviticus 4:3 (and various other passages) teach about the animals that the people would offer for sacrifice?
- B. Why do you think only these animals could be use as sacrifices?
17. A. What do Exodus 25:40 and 26:30 teach about the building of the Tabernacle?
- B. Why do you think this was so important?
18. What is a FIFTH REASON for giving the law?
19. A. When Moses didn't come down from the Mountain as soon as the people had expected or desired, what did they ask Aaron to do?
- B. What did the people say when Aaron did what they asked? (Exodus 32:4)
20. A. How did God respond to what the people did? (Exodus 32:9-10)
- B. How did Moses respond to God's "plan"? (Exodus 32:11-13)
- C. How did God respond to Moses' plea? (Exodus 32:14)?

-10-

### **FOR FUTHER REFLECTION**

1. The Lesson notes indicate that the Israelites did not really understand either God's holiness or their own sinfulness. Do you think that is still true of most people today? If not, why not? If so, what do you think is the best way to help people understand and realize their need for a Savior? Would it be more effective to stress man's sinfulness or to focus on God's holiness?
2. In Exodus 19:8 the people said to Moses, "We will do everything the Lord has said." Do you think they really thought they would be able to do that? Do you think there

are many people today who believe they are able to do that? Please give the reasons for your answers.

3. God “spoke” to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai through fire, smoke, thunder, lightning, and a loud trumpet blast. This definitely got their attention—at least for a while! (See Exodus 20:18-19). In what special ways does God “get the attention” of people today?
4. Do you agree or disagree with the following sentence? “Though the laws of God were sometimes burdensome, the giving of these laws was actually an act of grace on God's part.” Please give the reasons for your answer.
5. In what way(s) did the Ten Commandments and other laws point people to Jesus?

## Grace Lesson Four Answers

1. A
2. A. False  
B. False  
C. True
3. For some Jews the laws seemed almost endless and also burdensome.
4. A. They were to consecrate themselves for two days, wash their clothes, abstain from sexual relations, and stay away from the mountain where God would come near to them.  
  
B. The people had to develop a sense of holy fear in the presence of God while recognizing their own unholiness and sinfulness. They also had to realize that God was highly exalted and should not be approached casually but with awe, humility, and personal purity.
5. A. They trembled with fear, stayed at a distance, and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."  
  
B. The overall atmosphere on that occasion was awe-inspiring as God intended it to be. The people had never experienced anything like that before. Both the sights and the sounds were almost overwhelming. The people probably realized for the first time how absolutely awesome and holy their God was.
6. The first reason was to help the Israelites understand God's majestic holiness and their own dreadful sinfulness.
7. A. People are dead in transgressions and sins without Christ. They disobey the demonic ruler of the kingdom of the spirit world who is at work in all those who are disobedient. By nature people gratify the cravings of their sinful nature and follow its desires and thoughts and are objects of God's wrath.  
  
B. "Everyone has turned away from God and become corrupt. There is no one who does good, not even one."  
  
C. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (without Christ).  
  
D. "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."
8. A. "No one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin."  
  
B. "Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.'"

9. A. The second reason why God gave the law was to keep people from sinning against Him.
- B. Moses said, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." (Exodus 20:20).
10. B
11. Possible selections could include the following.
- A. (1) Exodus 19:5-6  
(2) Deuteronomy 6:1-3  
(3) Deuteronomy 28:1-14
- B. (1) Deuteronomy 28:15-16  
(2) Exodus 22:20
- C. The list of punishments.
- D. God knew (both because He knows all things and also because He had seen the sinful inclinations of the Israelites in the desert) that the people of Israel would often be tempted to be disobedient and would often fail to do what He commanded. The Israelites had to have these possible punishments deeply impressed on their minds so their awareness of them could serve as a (secondary) incentive to do what God commanded them to do.
12. "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."
13. A. The third reason for giving the law was to help people live in positive and constructive relationships with one another.
- B. In Deuteronomy 6:5 and also in Matthew 22:37.
- C. In Leviticus 19:18 and also in Matthew 22:39.
14. A. The fourth reason for giving the law was to emphasize how much the people needed a perfect Savior to fulfill God's laws in their behalf and also to pay the penalty for their own failure to obey Him.
- B. "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."
15. Psalm 51:1-10 teaches us that we need to be cleansed and purified and forgiven because of our sins and that we will never obtain this forgiveness and cleansing by human effort but only by God's mercy and grace.

16. A. These passages teach that the sacrifices had to be year old males without blemish or defect of any kind.

B. These sacrificial animals all pointed forward to Jesus Christ who was the PERFECT sacrifice for the sins of all who believe in Him.

17. A. The tabernacle had to be built exactly as God commanded Moses.

B. God wanted to emphasize that His people were to worship Him in the place and the way He revealed to them. They could not choose the place where they would bring their sacrifices and offerings and they could not be casual or indifferent about the way they brought them. Also, the tabernacle itself with its furnishings pointed forward to Jesus who “tabernacled” among us and fulfilled all the symbols involved in Old Testament tabernacle worship.

18. A fifth reason for giving the law was to help God's people live in a way that was pleasing to Him so they could give a strong and consistent testimony to the nations around them.

19. A. The people said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”

B. After Aaron made a golden calf the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

20. A. God severely punished the people, killing many of them, and even threatened to destroy them completely and make Moses into a great nation in their place.

B. Moses pleaded with God to show mercy and grace to the people for the sake of His own honor and glory. He also appealed for mercy on the basis of the promises He had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hundreds of years before.

C. God heard Moses' plea and graciously granted what he had asked for.