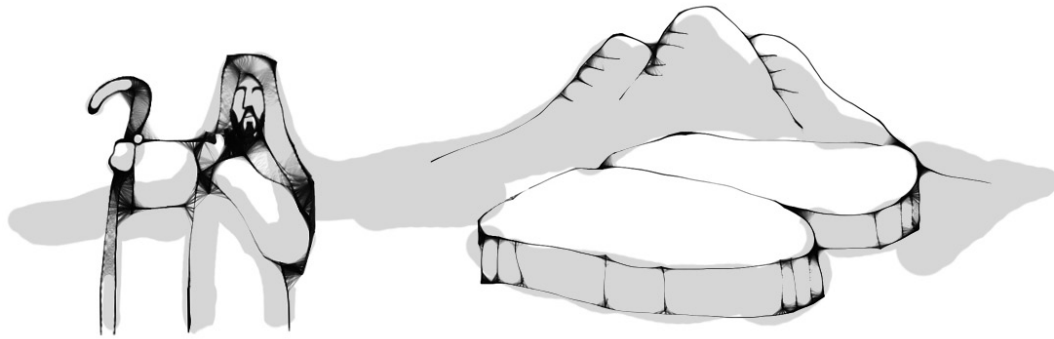


Christ and the Law of Moses



SABBATH—APRIL 5

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Luke 2:21–24; Exodus 13:2, 12; Luke 2:41–52; Matthew 17:24–27; Deuteronomy 22:23, 24; John 8:1–11.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Do you believe Moses? Then you should believe me. He wrote about me’ ” (John 5:46, NIV).

MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN TAUGHT THAT Jesus had a negative relationship with the Jewish religion. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding that has only caused people to be anti-Jewish over many hundreds of years. It is true that Jesus spoke out against abuses of the religion. But He was not against the religion itself. After all, He was the Founder of it.

The Gospel stories of Jesus' life and ministry (work done for God) show that Jesus was a faithful Jew. He faithfully followed Jewish culture from His birth to the final week of His life as a human being.

Like every loyal Jew in the first century, Jesus was under the law of Moses. Jesus was brought up in a home by loyal Jewish parents. So He fully respected His rich Jewish history. Jesus knew that God Himself had inspired Moses to write these laws. God wanted to start a society that showed His will and served as a lighthouse to the nations. Jesus followed every part of the law faithfully. From circumcision¹ to His visit to the temple to the feasts and to His attitude about taxes, Jesus always remained faithful to a system that would one day be fulfilled through His death and His ministry in heaven.

This week we will look at more of the laws that Jesus Himself kept.

DEFINITIONS

1. circumcision—to cut off the skin (called foreskin) at the end of the penis of a man or boy.

CIRCUMCISION AND DEDICATION (Luke 2:21–24)



Jesus was circumcised when He was eight days old, as was the custom.



The law required Mary to offer a sacrifice soon after Jesus was born.

DEFINITIONS

2. covenant—a promise or an agreement between God and His people.

God made His covenant² with Abraham. God said that Abraham would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4). When God made this covenant, the ninety-nine-year-old Abraham had only recently fathered Ishmael. And he had not yet seen the birth of his promised son, Isaac. But God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself along with every male member of his household. And God told Abraham to make sure that every son born into his household from that day forth be circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:9–12). This sign was so important that circumcision took place even if the eighth day fell on a Sabbath (Leviticus 12:3; John 7:22).

This truth gives us a better understanding of the earliest days of Jesus' life. The Gospels do show that Joseph and Mary were chosen to be the earthly parents of Jesus at least in part because of their holy lives. Joseph is described as a "righteous man" (Matthew 1:19, NASB). As for Mary, "God is very pleased with you [Mary]" (Luke 1:30, NIV). When Jesus was eight days old, His parents held a naming and circumcision ceremony as was the custom for all Hebrew males.

Imagine, the perfect Son of God, now a human baby, going through the same service that He Himself had started many hundreds of years before!

Read Luke 2:21–24 and compare it with Exodus 13:2, 12 and Leviticus 12:1–8. What more do these verses tell us about Joseph and Mary? What can we learn for ourselves, in our own time, from their example?

The Bible is clear that Mary was a virgin when she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:27). So, Jesus was the first child that opened her womb. Exodus 13 shows that every firstborn among the Israelites (whether animal or human) was to be dedicated to the Lord. The law also required in Leviticus 12:2–5 that after the birth of a male child, the woman was unclean for forty days (eighty days for giving birth to a female child). At the end of this time period, she was required to show herself to the priest and offer a sacrifice. As religious Jews, Mary and Joseph carefully followed the requirements of the law of Moses. This was to make sure that the Son of God had the marks of the covenant.

JEWISH FEASTS (John 5:1)

The first important festival (holiday) period in the Jewish calendar year is the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. This festival begins with Passover. The festival honors the freedom of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. That was the time when the angel of death *passed over* the homes of those who put the blood on their doorposts. The Gospels show three times when Jesus celebrated Passover (Luke 2:41–43; John 2:13–23; Matthew 26:17–20).

Fifty days after Passover came the feast of *Shavuot*. It is often spoken of by its Greek name, Pentecost. The Bible does not give a reason for Pentecost. But the rabbis believed that it honored the giving of the law to Moses. There is no record in the Gospels that Jesus celebrated Pentecost. But, before Jesus went up to heaven, He advised His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4, 5). This event actually occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4).

The final festivals in the Jewish calendar were the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). The Day of Atonement celebrates the day on which sin was cleansed from the camp and the people were at one (united; joined as one) with God. The Feast of Booths honors the time when Israel had to live in tents in the wilderness.

The Jews have two more festivals that honor God's historical acts of rescuing His people. The first is *Purim*, which honors the time when the Jews were set free from being sentenced to death as a people. This happened when Esther asked the Persian king to stop the Jews from being murdered. The second is *Hanukkah*, also known as the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). This celebrates the victory of the Maccabees³ over the Greeks in 164 B.C.

Of course, we no longer honor these biblical feasts. That is because they were all fulfilled in Christ. But we can learn much from studying them and the messages that they hold. This is because all of them teach lessons about God's saving grace⁴ and power to save people.

We no longer keep the feasts. But what things can we do to help us to remember what God has done for us and what He asks of us?



Passover celebrated the time when the angel of death passed over homes with blood on the doorposts.

DEFINITIONS

3. Maccabees—the Jewish rebels under the leadership of Judas Maccabee (not his true name). They rebelled and successfully fought against the Greek and Syrian army about 150 years before the birth of Christ.

4. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE (Luke 2:41–52)

The New Testament does not tell us too much about the childhood of Jesus. But there is one story about His childhood that teaches us a lot about Him as a boy. We find it in Luke 2:41–52. This is the story of Jesus' and His parents' visit to Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. Read it over. Then answer the following questions:

How does this story help show how important religion was to all that took place in Jewish life?

Why is it important that this story happened during Passover?

For how many days were Jesus' parents not able to find Him? Of what does that remind you?

Jesus was an obedient child. But His answer to His parents seems to be almost a scolding. What important point does His answer have? What does this tell all of us about what must be the most important thing in our lives?

Read Luke 2:51. What does it mean that Jesus was "subject [under their authority]" to them? How does this verse help us better to understand that God was so humble that He came down to us for our salvation? What can this teach us about the need for surrender in the right time and place?

TAXES (Matthew 17:24–27)

As last week’s lesson explained, the law of Moses had both civic (government) and ceremonial parts. The ceremonial part means that the temple was at the center of Jewish religious life. By the first century, the temple was probably the only remaining structure (building) that made people recognize the Jews as a nation.

The temple that stood in Jerusalem was undergoing remodeling during Jesus’ ministry. Herod the Great had started the great project in about 20 B.C. But it would not be fully finished until A.D. 66. The Romans recognized how serious many Jews were about their faith. So they let the Jews collect their own taxes to cover the costs of building this temple. Every Jewish male over the age of 20 was to pay the half-shekel tax, no matter how rich or poor he was (Exodus 30:13; Exodus 38:26).

Read Matthew 17:24–27. What did Jesus mean when He said, “ ‘But we don’t [do not] want to make them angry’ ” (verse 27, NIV)? What principle (important rule) do we find here that we should use in our own lives?

It seems that the temple tax collectors traveled to all the cities in Israel. They wanted to make sure that every male paid taxes. Peter’s first answer to the tax collectors makes it seem that Jesus regularly paid His taxes (Matthew 17:24, 25). But, as the Son of God, Jesus questions whether or not it is proper for Him to pay taxes for the building of His Father’s house.

“If Jesus had paid the tax without a protest, He would have shown that it was proper for Him to pay it. If so, Jesus would have denied the fact that He was the Son of God. He saw that it was good to pay the tax, but He denied the claim that He had to pay it. In paying the tax through a miracle, Jesus gave proof that He was one with God. He also showed that He did not have to pay the tax as a ‘citizen’ of the kingdom.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 434.

In the end, Jesus chose to obey the government leaders and commanded Peter to pay the tax from the mouth of the first fish that he caught. The shekel in the fish’s mouth was enough to cover the tax for both Jesus and Peter.

Jesus paid His temple tax even though He knew that the wonderful building would soon be destroyed (Matthew 24:1, 2). What should this tell us about our responsibility to be faithful in our tithes and offerings?



The shekel in the fish’s mouth covered the tax for Jesus and Peter.

LAW ENFORCEMENT (Matthew 5:17–20)

As we have seen, Jesus was a faithful citizen who did all that He was required to do as a Jewish male, even when His life was in danger (read, for example, John 7:1, 25, 26; John 10:31). In fact, Jesus makes it clear that it was not His purpose to remove “ ‘the Law or the Prophets [special messengers from God]’ ” (Matthew 5:17–20, NKJV).

How do Deuteronomy 22:23, 24 and Deuteronomy 24:1–4 help us to understand John 8:1–11 and Matthew 19:1–9? What is happening here?

Some of the Pharisees were always trying to call Jesus a lawbreaker (read, for example, John 8:6). When they bring to Him the woman who was caught in the act of adultery, they asked this question: “Moses says she should be stoned. But what do You say?” Jesus does not quickly answer their question. He supports the law of Moses with His answer, “ ‘Has any one of you not sinned? Then you be the first to throw a stone at her’ ” (John 8:7, NIV). Jesus is not saying that the woman should not be stoned. He just forces these men to see their own sins. Even the woman’s freedom honors the law of Moses because there is no one to accuse (blame) the woman. And at least two witnesses are needed in order for her to be put to death (Deuteronomy 17:6).

In the event of divorce and remarriage, Jesus appears to disagree with the law of Moses by saying that divorce was never God’s plan (Matthew 19:4–6). When the Pharisees point to Moses’ commandment in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, Jesus makes a point that makes everything clear. Moses never *commands* that divorce should take place. But, because of the people’s stubbornness, Moses made divorce papers possible (Matthew 19:8). So, we learn that even when Jesus seems to criticize a law of Moses, He does not put it aside. Jesus was a faithful Jew in every way. He followed the laws of Moses.

How do we learn to balance justice and grace for those who fall into sin as we do? If we are going to make mistakes in judging others as we often do, what side is it better to be on—the side that is too strict or too merciful? Why?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: For more information on this week’s topic, read Ellen G. White, “At the Feast of Tabernacles,” pages 447–454; “Among Snares,” pages 455–462, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Three times a year the Jews were required to meet at Jerusalem for religious purposes. Surrounded by the pillar of cloud, Israel’s invisible [unseen] Leader [Jesus] had given commands about these meetings. While the Jews were slaves in Babylon, these festivals could not be kept. But when the people returned to their own land, these festivals were once again held. It was God’s plan that these anniversaries should help the people to remember Him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 447.

“It was natural for the parents of Jesus to think of Him as their own child. He was with them every day. And His life was like that of other children in many ways. So it was difficult for the parents to understand that He was the Son of God. The parents were in danger of not understanding the blessing given to them by living in the presence of the world’s Savior. The grief of their three-day separation from Him, and the gentle scolding from the Boy Jesus served to remind them of the holiness of their trust.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 81.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Think about the wonderful truth that Jesus made these laws. But when He becomes a human, He puts Himself under these same laws. What does this tell us about the character (who He is) of God?
- 2 Try to put yourself in the position of Joseph and Mary. Imagine how hard it must have been for them to understand all that was involved with Jesus. Are there not a lot of things about Jesus that we do not understand either? How can we learn to trust and obey, even though we may not understand all there is to know?
- 3 What would you say to a Christian who argues that we are to keep the feasts? (Hint: You might start by asking, “How do you plan to keep them? Remember that the feasts centered around the temple, which has long been destroyed, and the shedding of blood, which has stopped.”)