



## Lesson 3

# Appreciate the Role of the Old Testament Law

## Worship

**Psalm 119:41-48** (spoken responsively by half-verse)

May your unfailing love come to me, LORD,  
**your salvation, according to your promise;**  
then I can answer anyone who taunts me,  
**for I trust in your word.**

Never take your word of truth from my mouth,  
**for I have put my hope in your laws.**  
I will always obey your law,  
**for ever and ever.**

I will walk about in freedom,  
**for I have sought out your precepts.**  
I will speak of your statutes before kings  
**and will not be put to shame,**  
for I delight in your commands  
**because I love them.**

I reach out for your commands, which I love,  
**that I may meditate on your decrees.**

**Prayer:** Lord God, the days of life in this world are often a time of friction and frustration. Be merciful to us and hear our prayer. Grant us peace and wisdom as we study the truth of your Word. By your Spirit open our hearts and minds to respond in faith and preserve your truth among us. Amen.

## Introduction

Clearly distinguishing between the covenant that God made with Abraham (the gospel promise of the Savior) and the covenant that God gave through Moses (regulations for the tribes of Israel) is critical to the understanding of Scripture. Laws were given through Moses to keep Israel separate and focused until the birth of the Savior. Jesus fulfilled those laws—the covenant of Moses had served its purpose and was no longer in effect. St. Paul explains this clearly in Galatians chapter 3 (the focus of this Bible study). Luther loved to lecture on Galatians and even called this book his “Katie von Bora” (as dear to him as his wife). But Luther also worked extensively



on Old Testament topics. In fact, as a professor at the University of Wittenberg, he lectured more often on Old Testament books than on those of the New Testament. Luther's emphasis on the Word meant that he saw value in all of it—including the study of God's covenant through Moses, even though it no longer applies to Christians. Understanding Moses (who wrote the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) could open up a window of insight into the function of God's law (or holy will), as well as supply examples of faith and unbelief. Misunderstanding of Moses could, unfortunately, lead a person astray—into a false and unfounded belief that salvation could be earned through obedience. But a person could never earn salvation through his or her obedience. Even Old Testament believers lived by faith in the promise of a Savior; they were merely guided in their life of faith by regulations that provided a temporary identity.

## The Power of the Word in the Early Church

### Galatians 3:15-25

<sup>15</sup> Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. <sup>16</sup> The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ. <sup>17</sup> What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

<sup>19</sup> Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. <sup>20</sup> A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

<sup>21</sup> Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. <sup>22</sup> But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

<sup>23</sup> Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.



## The Power of the Word in the Reformation

While the following section from one of Luther's sermons is read, underline the sentences or phrases that best describe the *three things* Luther wants Christians to take from a study of Moses.

Excerpts from "How Christians Should Regard Moses" (1525)—this writing originated as a sermon:

Dear friends, you have often heard that there has never been a public sermon from heaven except twice. . . . Now the first sermon is in Exodus 19 and 20; by it God caused himself to be heard from heaven with great splendor and might. For the people of Israel heard the trumpets and the voice of God himself.

In the second place God delivered a public sermon through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost [Acts 2:2-4]. On that occasion the Holy Spirit came with great splendor and visible impressiveness, such that there came from heaven the sudden rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting.

Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake."

### The Law of Moses Binds Only the Jews and Not the Gentiles

Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts [spiritualizers]. For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to be clever, and think they know something more than is presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before.

**Question: Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?**

**Answer to the Question: Three things are to be noted in Moses.**

I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug, because I find three things in Moses.

In the first place I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, "This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular."

But just as the Jews fail, so also do the Gentiles. Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature.

### **The second thing to notice in Moses**

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ. This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. The first thing, namely, the commandments, does not pertain to us. I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith. For things take place in the kingdom of Christ just as I read in Moses that they will; therein I find also my sure foundation.

In this manner, therefore, I should accept Moses, and not sweep him under the rug: first because he provides fine examples of laws, from which excerpts may be taken. Second, in Moses there are the promises of God which sustain faith. As it is written of Eve in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head," etc. Again Abraham was given this promise by God, speaking thus in Genesis 22:18, "In your descendants shall all the nations be blessed"; that is, through Christ the gospel is to arise.

### The third thing to be seen in Moses

In the third place we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unbelief. Therefore we should not sweep Moses under the rug. Moreover the Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage.

I have stated that all Christians, and especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses correctly. Thus where he gives the commandments, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do, and leave undone. However it is true that Moses sets down, in addition to the laws, fine examples of faith and unbelief—punishment of the godless, elevation of the righteous and believing—and also the dear and comforting promises concerning Christ which we should accept.

5. Having read part of Luther's sermon, list the *three things* he wants Christians to take from a study of Moses.

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6. How does Luther explain the relationship between the moral commands of Moses and the moral will of God under which we continue to live?

7. Why is the proper distinction between law and gospel so important?

#### NOTES

Can we decide on at least three reasons why it so difficult?

NOTES

8. What tempting misuses of Moses does Luther perceive?

## The Power of the Word Today

Distinguishing between the two covenants is not as easy as grouping biblical writings into Old and New Testaments, as if the Old were the *law* and the New were the *gospel*. These terms are used in multiple ways (this is something to note in Psalm 119—used in the opening worship of this lesson). Old Testament books, for instance, contain many gospel promises and images. And the will of God (his moral law) is clearly articulated in the New Testament words of Jesus (see the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew chapters 5–7) and the explanations of the apostles. A clear grasp of the differences between the two Old Testament covenants and a firm sense of how to apply what is law (God’s unchanging moral will) and what is gospel (God’s unchangeable promise of love) in God’s Word is imperative.

9. Luther uses the Ten Commandments from the covenant given to Moses at Mt. Sinai as the explanation of God’s will (God’s law) in the catechisms we use for instruction today. Formulate an answer to someone who says that this conflicts with the thoughts he proposed in his sermon.

NOTES

10. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today’s study?

## Summary

Luther understood well the power and pull of a rule-oriented religion. Medieval Catholicism stressed works over faith. Even in practice it followed “Mosaic” custom, with priests performing the “unbloody sacrifice” of the Mass. In addition, the only sense of God that people have by nature is one that fears his holy will—and attempts, in vain, to balance guilt with obedience. The review of Moses (the first five books of the Bible) clearly shows that salvation has always been a matter of faith in God’s promises. Even the long narratives of the covenant of law given through Moses do not endorse work-righteous salvation. It is clear that the Mosaic Law was a discipline for faith provided by a loving God to help his people maintain focus on him in the midst of a sinful world.

## At Home

For a family devotion read sections of the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5–7). Ask these questions: (1) How does Jesus “preach the commandments” (or reveal God’s moral will)? and (2) What elements of gospel comfort does Jesus provide?

## Additional Reading

The entire article “How Christians Should Regard Moses” can be found in *Luther’s Works*, Volume 35, pp. 155-174.

## Closing Prayer

**Hymn:** “The Ten Commandments Are the Law” (CW 285:1,2,11,12)

1. The Ten Commandments are the law  
Which Israel heard in holy awe.  
In smoke and fire from Sinai  
The voice of God shook the sky.  
Have mercy, Lord!
2. “I am your Lord and God alone!  
No other god but me enthroned!  
Put your whole confidence in me;  
Give me your heart totally.”  
Have mercy, Lord!
11. God gave these laws to show therein,  
O child of man, your life of sin,  
And help you rightly to perceive  
How unto God you should live.  
Have mercy, Lord!
12. Our works cannot salvation gain;  
They merit only endless pain.  
Forgive us, Lord! To Christ we fly,  
Our mediator on high.  
Have mercy, Lord!