

On This Side Of Jordan

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I have heard God's people at times aver that God's law never changes, will not change, even, cannot change. Often cited is Psalm 119:144, "The righteousness of Your testimonies is everlasting." Yet, we all understand that, in the Scriptures, the words "forever" or "everlasting" can have the force of "as long as current circumstances or situations exist." So, Christ assures us, as recorded in Matthew 5:18 that the law will not pass away. Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the law will be done away with—not until the end of all things, until all is fulfilled.

Christ qualifies His statement, not with the word "forever," but with two clauses: 1) As long as heaven and earth last, and 2) Not until all is fulfilled." When those two (related) conditions are met, the situation or circumstance will certainly have changed in a big way from today. Christ's qualifications suggest that, under those circumstances, and only then, will at least some parts of the law change.

That prompts us to ask, "Why do we need the law in the first place?" Paul asks exactly that question in Galatians 3:19, "What purpose does the law serve?" The apostle provides the short answer in the next breath, "It was added because of transgressions [human sin]." He goes on in verse 24 and 25 to refer to the law as a tutor. It teaches us what sin is. Paul had broached this purpose of law in Romans 7, where he gives a simple, forthright example referring to the tenth commandment.

Romans 7:7 I would not have known sin except through the law [that is, I would not recognize it, as some translations put it, know what it is]. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."

So, at least one of the purposes of law is to define sin for us. This is really what the Apostle John meant in his definitive statement at I John 3:4, "[S]in is a breaking of the law."

Turn to Daniel 9. For, we are left to ask, "When the circumstance of sin ceases, what happens to the law?" In verse 24, the prophet speaks of making "an end of sin." Not an end to sinning or sins, though that is there too, but an end to sin: The concept or reality of sin will be gone at a certain point in time. Absent. Hebrews 9:26 speaks of Christ's appearing, "At the end of the ages to put away sin." So, if, when all is fulfilled, there comes a time when there is no Satan, or at least not an active adversary, and therefore there is no sin, which is the product of his mind, then the law, which shows us what sin is, can be changed.

Turn to Hebrews 7. Now, what I have said by way of introduction is all pretty simple stuff. We all know it. A more pressing question for today might be, "Has the law changed at all so far?" Not in the future. So far? If so, what laws? I want to approach that question today.

Hebrews 7:12 (NLT) [I]f the priesthood is changed, the law must also be changed to permit it.

In context, Paul is arguing that a change in the priesthood has taken place—the change from the Aaronic priesthood to that of Melchizedek. Paul says that change in priesthood necessitated a change in law. He elaborates in verse 13-15.

Hebrews 7:13-15 (NLT) For the priest we are talking about [that is, Christ] belongs to a different tribe, whose members have never served at the altar as priests. [Paul becomes explicit:] What I mean is, our Lord came from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never mentioned priests coming from that tribe. This change has been made very clear since a different priest, who is like Melchizedek, has appeared.

The translation is difficult. Paul is saying that the change is already manifest or obvious, already taken place. The law regarding the priesthood has already changed, as a result of changing circumstances.

What is so intriguing to me about all this is that, centuries before Christ came, God foresaw this and prepared for the passing of the Aaronic priesthood by changing another law. Let us focus on that change by first going back to Leviticus 17. We will compare this chapter with Deuteronomy 12, to see how some laws remained absolutely fixed, not changing at all. Yet, one law changed.

Leviticus 17:3-4 “Whatever man of the house of Israel who kills an ox or lamb or goat [we are only talking about those three types of animals here, all clean, and all approved for sacrifice] in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the door of the tabernacle of meeting to offer an offering to the Lord before the tabernacle of the Lord, guilt of bloodshed shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.”

Sacrificial land animals (such as cattle, lamb, or goat) were to be butchered only at the Altar of the Tabernacle. To eat this kind of meat outside of this context was a very serious offense. Why? Verse 5.

Leviticus 17:5-7 “to the end that the children of Israel may bring their sacrifices which they offer in the open field, that they may bring them to the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, to the priest, and offer them as peace offerings to the Lord. And the priest shall sprinkle the blood on the altar of the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of meeting and burn the fat for a sweet aroma to the Lord. They shall no more offer their sacrifices to [goat] demons, after whom they have played the harlot.”

The Egyptians worshipped goats. And, all around the Israelites were people who sacrificed goats to gods associated with goats. Of course, Moses recognized that they were really sacrificing to demons. Let us drop down to verse 13:

Leviticus 17:13 “Whatever man of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who hunts and catches any animal or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust.”

What is different about this verse and verse 3? Verse 3 is speaking about goats, sheep, and cattle, animals which could be used for sacrifice. But, verse 13 is speaking of game animals, like deer or elk. Though clean, these cannot be used for sacrifices. The blood of these animals was not to be placed on God’s altar, but poured on the ground and covered. God elaborates about blood in verse 14:

Leviticus 17:14 For it is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, ‘You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.’”

Again, this is a very serious offense. Please, note that verse 14 broadens the focus: It does not just speak about domesticated animals, as in verse 3, or just about game animals, as in verse 13, but about all clean animals. You may *not* eat the blood of any of them. You can eat a game animal anywhere, inside or outside the camp—anywhere except at God’s altar, as it is not acceptable for sacrifice.

But, a domesticated animal—cattle, sheep, goats, had to be slain at the altar. Their blood needed to flow on the altar. You then could eat the meat there, sharing it with the priest according to the rules of the peace offering. (Of course, if you designated that it was to be a whole offering, you did not eat it, as it was totally consumed.)

Put simply, east or south of the Jordan River, before you entered the land, you could not go to your neighborhood McDonalds and have a hamburger. You could order a bison burger there, or a McDeer or McElk, as long as the blood was drained. But, no hamburgers would be sold there.

Now, with that background, turn over to Deuteronomy 12. We will see some major similarities, but one significant difference. Here, Moses has just reminded Israel they are to utterly destroy the idols of the people living in the land; they are not to syncretize. Beginning with verse 4:

Deuteronomy 12:4-5 “You shall not worship the Lord your God which such things [the way of the pagans]. But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place . . .

The Canaanites sacrificed all over the place, on “every high hill” or on “high places,” terms that appear more than 90 times in the Old Testament. Moses says Israel is not to do that. Only at the place. Continuing:

Deuteronomy 12:5-7 . . . there you shall go. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and your flocks. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God.”

So far, there is no change at all from the regulations specified in Leviticus 17. Sacrifices of all types are to take place in the venue God selects. Sacrifices will be performed at the altar before the Tabernacle, which eventually became parked at Shiloh on the west side of the Jordan River. Later, the altar was established at the Temple in Jerusalem. Nowhere else were sacrifices to take place.

Now, as a historical point, this rule did not apply to the Patriarchs. You will remember that Abraham or Jacob set up an altar here and there. God had not established a particular place in their day. But, with the building of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple—and with the institution of the Aaronic priesthood, a particular, discrete place was instituted. So important was this rule, once the people entered the land, the phrase, “the place which the Lord your God chooses,” or close variants thereof, appears no less than 24 times in the book of Deuteronomy alone.

In Leviticus 17 as well as in Deuteronomy 12, then, the central place of worship remains vital. But, I said there was a difference in Deuteronomy. We need to read further. Verse 8, where Moses continues speaking:

Deuteronomy 12:8-11 “You shall not do to all as we are doing here today [that is, the east side of the Jordan]—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes [Here is the reason]—for you have not come to the rest and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. But when you cross over the Jordan and dwell in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you live in safety, then there will be the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you.”

We will skip down to verse 13:

Deuteronomy 12:13-14 “Take heed to yourself that do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see [in a place of your choice]; but in the place which the Lord chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you.”

So far, there is no change in any rule. But, now for the change.

Deuteronomy 12:15 “However, you may slaughter and eat meat within all your gates, whatever your heart desires, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you; the unclean [person] and the clean [person] may eat of it, of the gazelle and the deer alike.”

Did you catch it? Gazelle and deer are game animals. There is the difference. In their wanderings in the wilderness, God required the people to eat cattle, sheep, and goats at the central place, the Tabernacle, as sacrifices before God, sharing the meat with the priests. Only game animals, like deer, could the people eat away from the Tabernacle.

Moses is saying that, once they cross the Jordan, on the west side of the River, they could eat cattle, sheep, and goats, just like they had been eating game, away from the Tabernacle. (They of course could still sacrifice sacrificial animals if they went to the Tabernacle or Temple.) In other words, once they occupied the Land of Promise, they could eat a hamburger at their neighborhood McDonalds—not just McDeer or my favorite, McMoose. Verse 16:

Deuteronomy 12:16 “Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it out on the earth like water.”

While it is now permissible to eat the meat of cattle, sheep, or goat without pouring its blood on the altar, eating blood was still prohibited. Over and over again this key law is stated. Do not eat blood.

In summary, we see that many things remained the same. For example, there would continue to be a central place for sacrifices. Of the land animals, only cattle, sheep, and goats were acceptable for sacrifice. Blood of any animal was not to be ingested. What changed is that the people could eat cattle, sheep, goats, away from the Tabernacle or Temple, in a non-sacrificial context. This could be looked at as a liberalization of law, but it is much more than that, as we will see in a minute.

Before we go any further, I want to point out that what stayed the same really stayed the same. Notice in Acts 15, a New Testament context. Here, James summarizes the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. The Gentiles were to,

Acts 15:20-21 “abstain. . . from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

The apostles agree that these words of Moses remain valid, reminding the Gentiles that they can hear specifics about the law every Sabbath by going to the synagogues scattered around the Roman Empire. The apostles do not use this occasion to deny the law of God or to aver that it had been done away. They knew better; the pre-conditions for the passing of the law had not yet been met. Sin was still around. Importantly, the apostles believe that the prohibition of eating blood is so important that it deserves special mention in their communique to the Gentile converts.

That is right. Nothing has changed the paramount place of blood in God’s plan of redemption. The life of the animal remains in its blood. Do not eat it. Pour it on the ground and cover it—a symbolic burial of the animal, showing respect for the animal. God wants His people to constantly remember that the shedding of blood means the death of a living being, including, and most importantly of course, Christ.

So, east or west side of the Jordan River, or in 21st century America, anywhere, blood universally remains important, as the sign of life.

We will not have time to go into the New Testament, but you all know that Hebrews 9:22 tells us that the atonement of sins requires the shedding of blood. We know that Christ’s blood did just that.

Another law which stayed the same for us today is the law of “one place.” In this vein, notice [John 4](#), Christ makes an interesting comment. In verse 20 the Samaritan woman says:

John 4:20-21 “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain [Samaria], and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.”

Please understand: In the Millennium, people will worship the Father in Jerusalem.

What about today? What about us? Well, entailed in the “better promises” of which we read in Hebrews 8:6, the “better promises” God has provided for His church is the ability for us to worship the Father in His own Temple, in the third heaven; to worship the Father “in spirit and in truth,” a phrase Christ used in John 4:23. This is worship on a God-plain, a spirit plain, a heavenly plain. This we alone are privileged to do. There is that one and only place for us.

Notice Hebrews 10:

Hebrews 10:19-20 (GNT) We have, then, my friends, complete freedom to go into the Most Holy Place by means of the death of Jesus. He opened for us a new way [not available before], a living way, through the curtain—that is, through his own body.

This is our place, our home, now, the place where we meet the Father, through the mediation of Christ. No one else has the right to meet Him there. There is absolutely no other viable place for us to meet God.

So, the laws regarding blood, and the law regarding place, did not change and are extremely important to us today. But, what about the law which did change, that law about eating cattle, sheep, and goats at the altar? Addressing the lawyers, Christ says in Luke 11:

Luke 11:46 “Woe to you also, lawyer! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

Christ did not do that. At the start of His ministry, as recorded in Luke 4:18, He quotes Isaiah 61:1-2, saying He had come “to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” For example, we all know that His teachings about the Sabbath freed people from the grinding restrictions imposed by the “traditions of the elders.”

Looking back at Deuteronomy 12, we see this same principle at work. For, in granting people the ability to eat cattle, sheep, goats in an environment away from the altar, God freed people from what would have been quite a burden once they settled down west of the Jordan River. If God did not change that rule, they would have to go to Jerusalem every time they wanted a hamburger or a lamb chop—or be guilty of bloodguilt, be cut off from Israel.

In the wilderness, that type of restriction was feasible—and it kept the people together—in the camp. It kept them away from the people outside who worshipped gods who were no gods—those goat demons. But, the restriction was not feasible west of the Jordan, where the people, in their inheritances, would be dispersed, spread out all over the land—many of them a substantial distance from the altar.

Think of it this way: If God had not changed the rule as stated in Leviticus 17, the unconverted would be guilty of sinning every time they ate lamb, beef, or goat. We, who are committed to obeying His law, would be unable to eat lamb, goat, or beef, because there is no altar. We could eat clean fish and fowl, of course.

However, there is much more to it than that. In changing the rule, God was looking far forward.

In Deuteronomy 31, God commissions Moses to write a song, which is then recorded in chapter 32. God is speaking to Moses.

Deuteronomy 31:19-21 “Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, of which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and have filled themselves and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them; and they will provoke Me and break My covenant. Then it shall be, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify against them as a witness; for it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants. for I know the inclination of their behavior today, even before I have brought them to the land which I swore to give them.”

Yes, when God inspired Moses to write chapter 12 of Deuteronomy, He was taking the long view. He knew that eventually He would have to destroy Jerusalem. The altar would be gone, He knew, for centuries and centuries on end. The Aaronic priesthood would be gone, and a new priesthood established. The Temple was destroyed about 40 years after Christ died, in 70 AD. There was then no extant priesthood to carry out the physical sacrifices. As an institution, the Aaronic priesthood became moribund.

The change in the law regarding the eating of cattle, sheep, and goats reflects the change God foresaw in the priesthood. That is all. No change in the moral law at all, but a change in the priesthood.

In His mercy, He gave us, and in fact all peoples around the world, the right to eat cattle, sheep, and goats away from His altar, separated from the Tabernacle, the Temple—and not incur bloodguilt as long as you do not eat the animal's blood. The change is an example of His kindness, not wanting to lay needless burdens on people.

God does not tempt people to sin by laying burdens on them which they cannot bear and which, even if they were kept, would yield no real spiritual benefit. That is, nothing was to be gained spiritually by worshipping God in one earthly place under the priesthood of Melchizedek, a heavenly priesthood. Nothing would be spiritually gained by requiring people to sacrifice animals on a physical altar.

With Christ's death, the physical sacrifices were unnecessary—as was the altar. And, Hebrews 10 tells us the blood of these animals does not affect the forgiveness of sins anyway.

Next time you eat a MacDonald's burger, you may want to do more than to complain about debased food (the fact that you are eating food which does not have much in the way of nutritional value at all).

It may serve us better to praise our God. He has mercifully established a better priesthood.

I will close with Hebrews 4:

Hebrews 4:14-16 (NET) Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help.