

Christ *and the Law of Moses*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 2:21–24; Exod. 13:2, 12; Luke 2:41–52; Matt. 17:24–27; John 8:1–11; Deut. 22:23, 24.*

Memory Text: “‘If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me’ ” (*John 5:46, NRSV*).

Many Christians have been raised on stories about Jesus' supposedly negative relationship to the Jewish religion, an unfortunate misconception that has only helped feed anti-Semitism through the centuries. Jesus spoke out against abuses of the religion, that's true, but not against the religion itself. After all, He was the founder of it.

Indeed, the Gospel accounts of His life and ministry show that Jesus was a faithful Jew fully immersed in Jewish culture from the moment of His birth to the final week of His life in human flesh.

Like every loyal Jew in the first century, Jesus was subject to the Mosaic law. Raised in a home with loyal Jewish parents, He fully appreciated His rich earthly heritage, which was rooted in Divine providence. He knew that God Himself had inspired Moses to pen these laws, with the purpose of creating a society that reflected His will and served as a beacon to the nations. He adhered faithfully to the letter of the law. From circumcision to His visit to the temple to the feasts and to His attitude about taxes, Jesus remained steadfastly faithful to a system that, He knew, would over time be fulfilled through His death and His ministry in heaven.

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

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.

Circumcision and Dedication *(Luke 2:21–24)*

God established His covenant with Abraham, saying that he would be the father of many nations (*Gen. 17:4*). When God made this covenant, the 99-year-old Abraham had only recently fathered Ishmael and had not yet seen the birth of his promised son, Isaac. Nonetheless, he was commanded to circumcise himself along with every male member of his household, and he was instructed to ensure that every son born into his household from that day forth be circumcised on the eighth day (*Gen. 17:9–12*). So important was this sign that the circumcision took place even if the eighth day fell on a Sabbath (*Lev. 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 piety. Joseph is described as a “righteous man” (*Matt. 1:19, NASB*), and Mary is said to have “found favor with God” (*Luke 1:30, NASB*). When Jesus was eight days old, His parents held a naming and circumcision ceremony in the same manner as an untold number of Hebrew males had experienced in times past.

Imagine, the spotless Son of God, now in human form, undergoing the very ritual that He Himself had instituted many centuries earlier!

Read Luke 2:21–24 in light of Exodus 13:2, 12 and Leviticus 12:1–8. What more do these texts tell us about Joseph and Mary? What can we learn for ourselves, in our own time and sphere, 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.” According to Exodus 13, every firstborn among the Israelites (whether animal or human) was to be dedicated to the Lord. The law also stipulated in Leviticus 12:2–5 that after the birth of a male child, the woman was ceremonially unclean for a total of 40 days (80 for a female child). At the end of this period, she was required to show herself to the priest and offer a sacrifice. As pious Jews, Mary and Joseph meticulously fulfilled the obligations of the Mosaic law and ensured that the Son of God bore the marks of the covenant.

Jewish Feasts *(John 5:1)*

“After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem” *(John 5:1, NKJV)*.

The first major festival period in the Jewish calendar year is the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commences with Passover. The festival commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, when the angel of death *passed over* the homes of those who put the blood on their doorposts. The Gospels record three occasions when Jesus celebrated Passover (*Luke 2:41–43, John 2:13–23, Matt. 26:17–20*).

Fifty days after Passover came the feast of *Shavuot*, often referred to by its Greek name, *Pentecost*. Although the Scriptures don’t provide a reason for Pentecost, the rabbis believed that it commemorated the giving of the law to Moses. There is no record in the Gospels that Jesus celebrated Pentecost. However, before His ascension He counseled 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 festival season in the Jewish calendar were the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Day of Atonement signifies the day on which sin was cleansed from the camp and the people were at one with God. Booths commemorates the time when Israel had to live in tents in the wilderness.

In addition to the feasts of Moses’ laws, the Jews have two other festivals that commemorate God’s historical intervention. The first is Purim, which marks the deliverance of the Jewish people from genocide, when Esther appealed to the Persian king. The second is Hanukah, also known as the Feast of Dedication (*John 10:22*), which celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks in 164 B.C.

Of course, the biblical feasts were done away with long ago, at least as far as Christians are concerned. They all met their fulfillment in Christ. However, we can learn a great deal through studying them and the messages that they contain, because all of them teach lessons about God’s saving grace and power to deliver.

Though we no longer keep the feasts, what things can we do that help to keep before us the reality of God, what He has done for us, and what He asks of us?

Jesus in the Temple

The New Testament does not tell us too much about the childhood of Jesus. One account, though, that gives great insight is Luke 2:41–52, the story of Jesus and His parents' visit to Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. Read it over and then answer the following questions:

How does this story help to illustrate the decidedly Jewish character of the Gospels and how central the religion was to all that took place?

How is it significant that this story took place during the Passover?

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

Though Jesus was an obedient child, His answer to His parents appears to be almost a rebuke. What important point does His reply contain? What does this say to all of us about what must have top priority in our lives?

Read Luke 2:51. What does it mean that He was “subject” to them? How does this verse give us even more insight into the amazing condescension on the part of God for our salvation? What can this teach us about the need for submission in the right time and place?

Taxes (*Matt. 17:24–27*)

As last week’s lesson noted, the law of Moses had both civic and ceremonial components. The ceremonial aspect means that the temple was at the center of Jewish religious life. In fact, by the first century, the temple was probably the only remaining structure that gave the Jews any sense of national identity.

The temple that stood in Jerusalem was undergoing renovations during Jesus’ ministry. Herod the Great had started the grandiose project in about 20 B.C., and it would not be fully completed until A.D. 66. Recognizing how serious many Jews were about their faith, the Romans allowed the Jews to collect their own taxes in order to cover the costs involved with the maintenance of the temple. Every Jewish male over the age of 20 was to pay the half-shekel tax regardless of his economic status (*Exod. 30:13, 38:26*).

Read Matthew 17:24–27. What did Jesus mean when He said: “Lest we should offend them”? What principle do we find here that we should apply in our own lives, as well?

It seems that the temple tax collectors traveled throughout the provinces to ensure that every male fulfilled his legal obligation. Peter’s initial response to the tax collectors gives the impression that Jesus regularly paid His taxes (*Matt. 17:24, 25*). However, as the Son of God, Jesus appears to question the appropriateness of having to pay taxes for the upkeep of His Father’s house.

“If Jesus had paid the tribute without a protest, He would virtually have acknowledged the justice of the claim [that He was under obligation to pay], and would thus have denied His divinity. But while He saw good to meet the demand, He denied the claim upon which it was based. In providing for the payment of the tribute He gave evidence of His divine character. It was made manifest that He was one with God, and therefore was not under tribute as a mere subject of the kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 434.

Notwithstanding, Jesus chose to comply with the authorities and directed Peter to retrieve 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 magnificent structure would soon be destroyed (*Matt. 24:1, 2*). What should this tell us about our obligations to be faithful in our tithes and offerings, regardless of whatever problems we believe exist?

Law Enforcement *(Matt. 5:17–20)*

As we have seen, Jesus was a faithful citizen who fulfilled His responsibilities as a Jewish male, even when His life was in danger (*see, for example, John 7:1, 25, 26; 10:31*). In fact, Jesus makes it clear that it was not His purpose to abolish “‘the Law or the Prophets’” (*Matt. 5:17–20, NKJV*).

How, then, are we to understand **John 8:1–11** and **Matthew 19:1–9** in light of **Deuteronomy 22:23, 24** and **24:1–4**? What is happening here?

Some of the Pharisees were always trying to expose Jesus as a law-breaker (*see, for example, John 8:6*). When they present Him with the woman who was caught in the act of adultery, they pose this question: Moses says she should be stoned; what do You say? Interestingly enough, Jesus does not directly respond to their inquiry. In fact, He affirms the law of Moses with His response, “‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’” (*John 8:7, NKJV*). He isn’t saying that she shouldn’t be stoned; He simply forces these men to see their own violations of the law. Even the woman’s release is in harmony with the law of Moses, because there is none to point an accusing finger, and at least two witnesses are needed to administer justice (*Deut. 17:6*).

In the incident concerning divorce and remarriage, Jesus appears to contradict the law of Moses with His insistence that there were originally no grounds for divorce (*Matt. 19:4–6*). When the Pharisees point to Moses’ commandment in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, Jesus places everything in perspective. Nowhere does Moses command that divorce should take place. However, because of the people’s obstinacy, Moses made an allowance for divorce (*Matt. 19:8*). Thus, we see that even when Jesus critiques a Mosaic law, He does not set it aside. Jesus was a faithful Jew in every way, adhering to the laws of Moses.

How do we learn to balance justice and grace for those who, like ourselves, fall into sin? If we are going to err, as we as fallen beings inevitably do, what side is it better to err on, and why?

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

“Three times a year the Jews were required to assemble at Jerusalem for religious purposes. Enshrouded in the pillar of cloud, Israel’s invisible Leader had given the directions in regard to these gatherings. During the captivity of the Jews, they could not be observed; but when the people were restored to their own land, the observance of these memorials was once more begun. It was God’s design that these anniversaries should call Him to the minds of the people.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 447.

“It was natural for the parents of Jesus to look upon Him as their own child. He was daily with them, His life in many respects was like that of other children, and it was difficult for them to realize that He was the Son of God. They were in danger of failing to appreciate the blessing granted them in the presence of the world’s Redeemer. The grief of their separation from Him, and the gentle reproof which His words conveyed, were designed to impress them with the sacredness of their trust.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 81.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Dwell on the incredible truth that though Jesus instituted these laws, when He enters into humanity He places Himself under them. What does this tell us about the character of God?
- ❷ Try to put yourself in the position of Joseph and Mary. Is it any wonder that they didn’t fully understand all that was involved with Jesus? Are there not a lot of things about Jesus that we don’t understand either? How can we learn to trust and obey, despite the many things that we don’t understand?
- ❸ 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 intend to keep them, given that the feasts all centered around the temple, which has long been destroyed, and the shedding of blood, which has stopped?”)

An Offering of Praise

Yesuvadian was in his 60s when he first met Jesus through a dream. God called him to serve Him, and Yesuvadian answered. He left his farm to his family and walked away to follow God's leading.

For several years, he walked from village to village, sharing his newfound faith in God with others. In the past 25 years, he has led more than four hundred people to Christ, revived three dying churches, and started four new congregations. When the local field saw what Yesuvadian was doing, they offered him a stipend to help him.

When Yesuvadian finds a dying church, he visits the people in the area and leads them to Jesus. Then he oversees the work to rebuild the church so that the growing congregation has a suitable house in which to worship.

When he finds a village without believers, he settles among the people and begins planting seeds of faith. He stays until a congregation and a simple church building have been raised.

Recently, Yesuvadian walked to a village and began seeking out people who were willing to hear about Jesus. He began studying the Bible with them, and their interest grew. Yesuvadian has spent two years in that village and continues working there. So far more than twenty people have been baptized, and the congregation is growing stronger. But Yesuvadian, now in his 80s, is thinking of moving on to start a new congregation someplace else. While he's waiting for God's call, he's helping to give Bible studies for an upcoming series of meetings to be held in a central town nearby.

"God has blessed me in so many ways," Yesuvadian says. "He leads me to the rich and poor alike. He leads me to those who want to know more about God. I stay and study with anyone who wants to hear God's message." While some of the people he studies with are from a Christian background, many are not. He finds special needs in the village and tries to help meet those needs, whether it's for food or clothes or community support.



"I have no intention of retiring," he says with a smile spreading across his weathered face. "I'm looking forward to holding another series of meetings, raising up another church." Usually Yesuvadian doesn't preach, but he invites evangelists to come and speak at the evangelistic meetings after he has tilled the soil and planted seeds of faith.

"God has shown me His love and given me strength to do His work," he says. "Sharing my faith is my offering of praise to my God."

YESUVADIAN, a former farmer, shares his faith with others in southeastern India.